

PLANET STORIES



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WINTER, 1943

STRANGE ADVENTURES ON OTHER
WORLDS—THE UNIVERSE OF
FUTURE CENTURIES

CRYPT-CITY OF THE DEATHLESS ONE

THE LONG-GONE ANCIENTS HAD
LEFT THEIR CREATURES ON WATCH

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by HENRY KUTTNER

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PLANET STORIES



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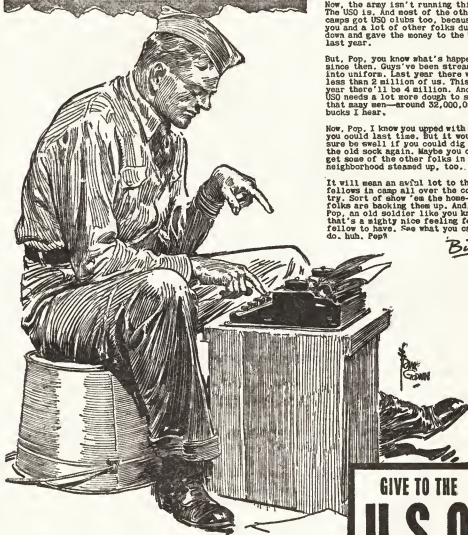
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Dear Pop:



Even an old Rainbow Divisioner like you would pop your eyes at the arms we're putting together this time. Let me tell you, they're doing everything to make up just about the best bunch of fighting galoots you ever saw.

And that goes for what they do for us off duty, too! Take this new club house we got just outside of camp. It's got radios, dance floors, nice soft chairs and everything. And, Pop, you can get something to eat that won't cost you a month's pay.

Now, the army isn't running this. The USO is. And most of the other camps got USO clubs too, because you and a lot of other folks dug down and gave the money to the USO last year.

But, Pop, you know what's happened since then. Guys've been streaming into uniform. Last year there was less than 2 million of us. This year there'll be 4 million. And the USO needs a lot more dough to serve that many men—around 32,000,000 bucks I hear.

Now, Pop, I know you upped with what you could last time. But it would sure be swell if you could dig into the old sock again. Maybe you could get some of the other folks in the neighborhood steamed up, too.

It will mean an awful lot to the fellows in camp all over the country. Sort of show 'em the home-folks are backing them up. And, Pop, an old soldier like you knows that's a mighty nice feeling for a fellow to have. See what you can do. huh. Pop?

Bill

Send your contribution to your local USO Committee or to National Headquarters,
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GIVE TO THE
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CRYPT-CITY
of the
DEATHLESS ONE



*A grimly-stirring novel of weird
adventure on an alien world*

by

HENRY KUTTNER

CRYPT-CITY OF THE DEATHLESS ONE

By Henry Kuttner

Only once could a man defy the deathless guardians of the Ancient's tomb-city deep in Ganymede's hell-forest and expect to live. Yet Ed Garth had to return, had to lead men to certain doom—to keep a promise to a girl he would never see again.



I CY WATER splashed into Ed Garth's face and dripped down his tattered, grimy shirt. It was a tremendous effort to open his eyes. Fumes of the native Ganymedeian rotgut liquor were swimming in his brain.

Someone was shaking him roughly. Garth's stocky body jerked convulsively. He struck out, his drink-swollen face twisted with frightened fury, and gasped, "*Ylgana! Vo m'trana al-khron—*"

The hand on his shoulder fell away.

Someone said, "That's it, Paula! The Ancient Tongue!"

And a girl's voice, doubtful, a little disgusted.

"You're sure? But how in the System did this—this—"

"Bum. Tramp," Garth muttered, peering blearily at the pale ovals of unfocused faces above him. "Don't mind me, sister. Beachcomber is the word—drunk, right now. So please get the hell out and let me finish my bottle."



More water was sluiced on Garth. He shook his head, groaning, and saw Tolomo, the Ganymede trader, scowling down at him. The native's three-pupiled eyes were angry.

English hissed, oddly accented, on his tongue.

"You wake up, Garth! Hear me? This is a job for you. You owe me too much already. These people come looking for you, say they want a guide. Now you do what they want, and pay me for all that liquor you buy on credit."

"Sure," Garth said wearily. "Tomorrow. Not now."

Tolomo snorted. "I get you native guides, Captain Brown. They know way to Chahnn."

The man's voice said stubbornly, "I don't want natives. I want Ed Garth."

"Well, you won't get him," Garth growled, pillowing his head on his arms. "This joint smells already, but you make it worse. Beat it."

He did not see Captain Brown slip Tolomo a folded credit-current. The trader deftly pocketed the money, nodded, and gripped Garth by the hair, lifting his head. The bluish, inhuman face was thrust into the Earthman's.

"Listen to me, Garth," Tolomo said, fairly spitting the words. "I let you come in here and get drunk all the time on the cuff. You pay me a little, not much, whenever you gather enough alka-roots to sell. But you owe plenty. People ask me why I let a bum like you come to my *Moonflower-Ritz Bar*—"

"That's a laugh," Garth mouthed. "A ramshackle plastic flophouse full of cockroaches and bad liquor. *Moonflower-Ritz*, hogwash!"

"Shut up," Tolomo snapped. "I let you run up a bill here when nobody else would. Now you take this job and pay me or I have the marshal put you in jail. At hard labor, in the swamps."

Garth called Tolomo something unprintable. "Okay," he groaned. "You win, louse. You know damn well no Earthman can stand swampwork, even with bog-shoes. Now let go of my hair before I smash your teeth in."

"You do it? You guide these people?"

"I said I would, didn't I?" Garth reached fumblingly for the bottle before

him. Someone thrust a filled glass into his hand. He gulped the fiery purplish liquor, shuddered, and blew out his breath.

"Okay," he said. "Welcome to Ganymede, the pleasure spot of the System. The worst climate outside Hell, the only world almost completely unexplored, and the nicest place for going to the dogs I've ever seen. The Chamber of Commerce greets you. Here's the representative." He pointed to a six-legged lizard with the face of a gargoye that scuttled over the table and leaped into the shadows where the light of the radio-lamp did not reach.

Captain Brown said, "I can offer you fifty dollars to guide us to the ruined city—Chahnn. And, maybe, I can offer you *ten thousand bucks* to do another little job for us."

THE SHOCK of that was more effective than cold water had been. Garth jerked back, for the first time looking at his companions. There were two of them—a man and a girl, their neat tropical outfits looking out of a place in this grimy dive. The man was thin and bronzed, looking as though all the moisture had been boiled out of him by hot suns. He was made of tough leather, Garth thought. His face was the most expressionless one Garth had ever seen—pale, shallow eyes, a rat-trap mouth, and the general air of a tiger taking it easy.

The girl . . . sudden sick pain struck through Garth. She looked like Moira. For an incredible moment he thought, with his liquor-dulled mind, that she had come back. But Moira was dead—had been, for nearly five years now.

Five years of living death—hitting the skids on Ganymede, where men go down fast. Garth's ravaged face hardened. He forced himself to look squarely at the girl.

She wasn't Moira, after all. She had the same look of sleek, clean femininity, but her hair was golden-red instead of brown, and her eyes were greenish, not blue. The softness in her face was belied by the stubborn, rounded chin.

"Ten thousand?" Garth repeated softly. "I don't get the picture. Any native could take you to Chahnn."

The girl said, "We know that. We're interested in—something else. Could you use ten grand?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I could," Garth said.

"What would you do with it? Go back to Earth? We might swing it so you could get a job there. There's been a shortage of men ever since the Silver Plague started."

Garth laid his fingers gently around the glass and squeezed, till the transparent plastic was bent out of shape. He didn't look at the girl.

"I'm through with Earth. If I could collect—ten thousand?—I'd commit suicide, in a very funny way. I'd go into the Black Forest. The money could get me the men and equipment I'd need, but—well, nobody gets out of the Black Forest alive."

"You did," Captain Brown said.

"Eh? You heard about that?"

"We've heard stories—plenty of them. About how you came out of the Black Forest six years ago, raving with fever and talking in a language nobody could understand. And how you've been taking trips into the Forest ever since. Just what happened? I know you tried to get up expeditions to rescue a man named Willard—he was with you, wasn't he?"

Garth felt again that sick deadness in his brain—the monstrous question that had been tormenting him for five years now. Abruptly he slammed his fist on the table. Tolomo's face appeared behind a curtain and vanished again as Brown waved him back.

"Forget it," Garth said. "Even on Ganymede, men mind their own business—usually."

Brown stroked his cheek with a calloused thumb. "Suit yourself. Here's the set-up, then. It's strictly confidential, or the deal's off. You'll know why later. Anyhow—we want you to guide us into the Black Forest."

GARTH'S laughter rang harsh and bitter. Brown and the girl watched him with impassive eyes.

"What's so funny about it?" she asked, scowling.

Garth sobered. "Nothing much. Only for five years I've been sweating blood trying to get into the Forest, and I know the place better than anybody on Ganymede. See this?" He rolled up his sleeve and exhibited a purplish scar along his arm. "A cannibal-plant did that. I couldn't get away from the thing. Bullets and knives

don't hurt the blood-sucker. I had to stand there for two hours, helpless, till it got all the blood it wanted. After that I managed to pull away."

"I've picked up a few scars myself," Brown said quietly.

Garth glared at him. "Not in the Black Forest. The only way to get through that pest-hole is with a big, armed expedition. Even then . . . you ever heard of the Noc-toli?"

"No. Who—"

"Flowers. Their pollen works funny—plenty funny. They grow in the interior, and they give you amnesia. Not even gas-masks help. The stuff works in through your skin."

"Doesn't it affect you?" the girl wanted to know.

Garth shivered and drank again. "It did—once. Later I managed to work out an antitoxin. And I've built up immunity, anyway. But it's quite a laugh. The two of you wanting to go into the Black Forest!"

Brown's face was emotionless. "With an expedition, well armed. I'll provide that."

"Oh. That's a bit different. Just the same—what are you after?"

"Just sightseeing," the girl said.

Garth grinned crookedly. "Okay. I know the stories. Everybody on Ganymede's heard of the *Ancients*."

Captain Brown's eyes hooded. "What about them?"

"The lost race? That they lived on Ganymede thousands of years ago, and had the greatest science ever known to the System. That they died, nobody knows how, and the secrets of their civilization were lost. Chahnn's only one of their ruined cities. There've been a dozen others found. And full of gadgets and robots that nobody knows how to work. There was a central power-source, but Earthmen have never figured out how it worked or what fuel was used. The inscriptions found in the cities didn't tell anything."

"Fair enough," Brown nodded. "Except you forgot one thing. You know the Ancient Tongue. You speak it."

Garth chewed his lip. "So what?"

"Where did you learn it?"

"I don't know. In the Black Forest, I suppose. I don't remember."

The girl made an impatient gesture. She quieted as Brown glanced at her.

"From the Zarno, Garth?"

"I don't know! There's no proof the Zarno even exist!"

"If you've gone far enough into the Black Forest—"

Garth said angrily, "Remember what I told you about the Noctoli? The effect of the pollen? When I got back to Oreport here I had amnesia. I—" He hesitated. "I don't remember. I never did remember what happened in the Black Forest."

"Um-m." Brown rubbed his cheek again. "A lost race of savages no outsiders have ever seen—a race speaking the tongue of the Ancients. How could they live around those Noctoli flowers of yours?"

"Natural immunity," Garth said. "Built up over a period of generations. I didn't have that—then."

THE GIRL leaned forward, ignoring Brown. "Mr. Garth," she said swiftly, "I think I'd better explain a bit more. Shut up, Carver!" She frowned at Brown. "There've been too many mysteries. Here's the set-up. I've got half of a—a map. It shows the location of something in the Black Forest that's immensely valuable—the greatest treasure the System's ever known. I don't know what it is. The original inscription, in the Ancient's language, is cryptic as the devil. But the Ancients thought this treasure important enough to be worth hiding in the Black Forest. They set the Zarno to guard it. See?"

Garth grunted. "So what?"

"Well—I'm Paula Trent, archaeologist. Not that it matters. For months Carver and I have been waiting our chance to fit out an expedition and come on here. We didn't have the money, at first, and when we did get it, the government refused us permission. We had no proof, they said, and the Black Forest is impenetrable. So we waited. A month ago we got wind of a research ship, the *Hunter*, coming on here to investigate Chahnn. The same old stuff—digging around in the ruins, trying to find out what made the machines and robots tick, trying to make sense out of the inscriptions. Trying to find a cure for the Silver Plague."

Garth said, "No cure's been found yet, then."

Paula shook her head. "No. Since it started on Earth ten years ago, it's wiped out one-twentieth of the population, and unless it's stopped, it'll destroy all life on our world. But that's old stuff. Except the government's sending out their best men to Ganymede, because it's known the Silver Plague existed here once and was conquered. The inscriptions in Chahnn show that. But they don't say what the treatment was, or give any hints. However—" She brushed red-gold hair from her forehead. "Carver and I have planted men in the *Hunter* crew. Tough, good men who'll strike out with us into the Black Forest. With equipment."

"Desertion, eh?"

"Technically, sure. But the only way. Nobody will listen to us. We know—we know—the Ancients hid their most valuable treasure in the Black Forest. What it is we don't know. We're hoping it'll solve a lot of problems—the mystery of what powered their machines, what happened to the Ancients—all that."

"No planes can be used," Garth said. "There's no place to land in the Forest."

"That's why we want you. You know the Forest, and you know the Ancient Tongue. Guide the *Hunter* crew to Chahnn. Then, when we give the word—head for the Black Forest with us."

Garth said, "On one condition. You can't go."

Paula's eyes narrowed. "You're in no position to—"

"Men might get through. A woman couldn't. Take it or leave it," Garth repeated stubbornly.

Captain Brown nodded to the girl. "All right, it's a deal. Sorry, Paula, but he's on the beam. Here's ten bucks, Garth. Balance when we get to Chahnn. We leave tomorrow at Jupiter-rise."

GARTH didn't answer. After a moment Paula and Brown rose and went out through the mildewed tapestry curtain. Garth didn't blame them. The *Moonflower-Ritz* smelled.

Presently he found Tolomo and gave him the money. The Ganymedeans hissed worriedly.

"Only ten?"

"You'll get the rest later. Gimme a bottle."

"I don't think—"

Garth reached across the bar and seized a quart. "Hereafter I do my drinking out-of-doors," he remarked. "I'll feel cleaner."

"*Sfant!*" Tolomo flung after him as he headed for the door. Garth's cheeks burned red at the word, which is Ganymedeian and untranslatable; but he didn't turn. He stepped out into the muddy street, a cold wind, sulphurous and strong, stinging his nostrils.

He looked around at the collection of plastic native huts. Till the *Hunter* had arrived, he'd been the only Earthman in Oretown. Now—

He didn't feel like talking to natives. The Tor towered against the purple sky, where three of Jupiter's moons were glowing lanterns. At the base of the Tor was Garth's shack.

Swaying a little, clutching the bottle, he headed in that direction. He had waited five years for this moment. Now, when at last he might find the answer to the problem that had turned him into a dervish, he was afraid.

He went into his hut, switched on the radio-lite, and stood staring at a door he had not opened for a long time. With a little sigh he pushed at the latch. The smell of musty rot drifted out.

A lamp revealed a complete medical laboratory, one that had not, apparently, been used for months at least. Garth almost dropped a bottle as he fumbled it from the shelf. Cursing, he opened the rotgut Ganymedeian whiskey and poured it down his throat.

That helped. Steadied somewhat, he went to work. The Noctoli pollen antitoxin was still here, but it might have lost its efficacy.

He tested it.

Good. It seemed strong, the antibodies having a long life-cycle. It would work.

Garth packed a compact medical kit. After that he stood for quite a while staring at two blank spaces on the wall, where pictures had once hung.

Moirá and Doc Willard.

Damn! Garth snatched up the liquor and fled the house. He fought his way along the steep path that led to the Tor's summit. The physical exertion was a relief.

AT THE TOP, he sat down, his back against a rock. Beneath him lay Oretown, yellow-blue lights winking dimly. In a cleared field some distance away was the ovoid shape of the spaceship that had brought Paula and Brown—the *Hunter*.

To the west, across sandy desert, lay Chahnn, dead city that had once housed an incredibly-advanced science—lost now, its people dust. Northwest, beyond distant ridges, was the Black Forest, unexplored, secret, menacing.

Six years ago Dr. Jem Willard had come to Ganymede with his intern, Ed Garth. Willard was trying to discover the cure for the Silver Plague that was wrecking Earth. He would have found it—he had got on the track. But—

An emergency call had come in one night. A native needed an appendectomy. Willard couldn't fly a plane. He had called on Garth, and Garth had been drunk.

But he had piloted the plane anyhow. The crack-up happened over the Black Forest.

That was the last thing Garth remembered, or almost the last. It would have been more merciful if the oblivion had been complete. Months later he staggered out of the Forest into Oretown, alone. The Noctoli poison had almost erased his experiences from his mind. He could remember a bare cell where he and Willard had been prisoned—that, and one other thing.

A picture of Doc Willard stretched on an altar, while Garth lifted a gleaming, razor-sharp knife above his friend's breast.

He remembered that, but no more. It was enough.

The question burning in his brain had nearly wrecked his sanity. He had tried to get back into the Black Forest, to find Willard, dead or alive, to learn what had happened—to discover the answer to his problem. He had failed.

A year later he learned that his fiancée, Moirá, had died of the Silver Plague. And he knew that Willard might have saved her, had he lived and continued his research.

After that, Ed Garth hit the skids. He went down fast, stopping only when he reached the bottom.

He killed the bottle and threw it out into emptiness, watching yellow light glint on glass as it dropped.

Well, he had his chance now. An expedition going into the Black Forest. But Garth was no longer the same husky giant who had fought his way through that deadly jungle. Five years on the skids had played havoc with him. Stamina was gone. And the Black Forest was as terrible, as powerful, as ever.

Garth wished he had brought another bottle.

II

JUPITER is a ball of luminous clouded marble, gigantic in the sky of Gany-mede. Its light is a queer, pale glow that lacks the warm brilliance of sunlight. When the titanic planet lifts over the horizon, gravity seems to shift, and the ground feels unstable beneath your feet.

Jupiter was rising now. Oretown lay ugly and desolate in the strange dawn. Across the plain where the spaceship had landed a string of truck-cats, big silvery desert freighters, stood motionless, ready to start the trip. There were signs of activity. At the central port of the *Hunter* stood a lanky, gray-haired man with a clipped, stiff Van Dyke. Behind him was Captain Brown.

Garth, his medical kit strapped to his back, ploughed through the light film of snow that lay over the sand. He was shivering in his thin garments, wishing he had a drink. Neither Brown nor his companion saw Garth's approach. The gray-haired man was speaking.

"—time to start. If this guide of yours doesn't show up, we'll have to wait till we find another."

"He'll show up," Brown said. "I only gave him ten bucks."

Garth reached the foot of the ramp leading up to the port-valve. "Morning. Am I late?"

There was no answer. He climbed the slope, slippery with snow despite the skid-treads, and stopped before the two men. Brown nodded at him.

"Here's our guide, Commander Benson."

Benson scowled incredulously under tufted brows. "What the devil! You—you're an Earthman!"

"Sure," Garth said. "What about it?"

The Commander glanced at Brown. "I expected a native. I didn't know—" He left the sentence hanging. "You can't wear

those rags, man. Captain, break out some clothes for him." Without another look at Garth, Benson hurried down the ramp, shouting orders to someone below.

Brown grinned at the other. "Come on inside," he urged, and, in a lower tone, "He's the big shot. You know enough to keep your mouth shut—eh?"

Garth nodded. Brown peered at him sharply.

"You need coffee. I'll lace it. Come along." He took Garth to the galley, and, presently, supplied food, drink, and clothing. He lit a cigaret, idly watching the smoke sucked into the air-conditioning grill.

"Benson's a tough egg," he said at last. "If he had the slightest idea we were figuring on—what we're figuring on, there'd be trouble. The Commander never takes chances. We've got to give him the slip, somehow."

Garth gulped coffee. "How many men do you have?"

"Ten."

"Not many."

"Fully armed, though. There are sixty in the expedition altogether, but I could only feel sure of ten. Some of them I planted myself."

Garth took the cigaret Brown handed him. "Thanks . . . I know Chahnn pretty well. Once we get there, we can get away from the others."

"How?"

"Underground passages — not well known. We'll come out about thirty miles from Chahnn, and from there it's another twenty to the Black Forest."

"The last lap on open ground?"

"Yeah."

"Not so good. If Benson misses us, he'll have planes out scouting. I've a hunch he's suspicious already."

"If he catches up with us, so what? There'll be other chances."

"That's what you think," Brown said grimly. "I told you Benson was a tough egg. He'd clap us all in the brig and we'd end up with prison sentences on Earth—hazarding the success of a planetary expedition, they call it. So you see why we've got to find this treasure, whatever it is."

"Then you don't know either, eh?"

"Maybe I've a few ideas . . . Finished? Let's go, then." Brown came to his feet.

GARTH followed Brown out of the ship, pondering. The Ancients had, admittedly, been an incredibly advanced race. Any treasure they thought worth guarding would be plenty valuable. Gold? Gems? They seemed trivial, compared to the tremendous scientific powers of the Ancients. And unimportant as well, while the Silver Plague raged over Earth.

They moved along the string of truck-cats, each loaded with the necessary equipment, and reached the first. Commander Benson was already there, talking to the pilot. He looked around.

"Ready? What's your name—Garth? All right, get in."

The front compartment of the truck-cat was roomy enough. Paula Trent, Garth saw, was already there. She gave no sign that she noticed him. He shrugged and found a seat, and Captain Brown dropped beside him, impassive as ever.

The pilot came in. "Sit up here, next to me, buddy," he ordered. "I'll need your help wrestling this tank through the arroyos."

Benson himself was the last man to enter. He slid the door shut and nodded.

"Warm her up."

Beside the driver, Garth could not see the others, nor could he hear their conversation as the motors coughed and snarled into life. The truck-cat lurched forward on her caterpillar treads. The pilot looked inquiringly at Garth.

"Where'll I head? West? What about these quicksands I've been hearing about?"

"Steer for that mountain peak 'way over there," Garth told him. "It's easy to see the sink-holes. They're big grey patches on the sand, with no snow on 'em."

The roar of the engine died into a monotonous murmur. It was possible to hear the conversation in the rear of the compartment. Commander Benson was talking.

"—atomic power. It must have been that; there's no other answer. All we need to know is the nature of the booster charge."

"I don't get it," Paula said. "Booster charge?"

"As far as our physicists know, atomic power's possible if there's a known way to start it and control it. Earth's reserves are nearly exhausted. Oil, coal—used up

almost completely. And Earth needs power plenty bad, to maintain civilization."

"The other planets have fuel."

"Spaceshipping's too expensive. It's prohibitive, Paula. Unless a new power source is found very soon, Earthmen may have to migrate to another world—and our civilization's so complex that that's nearly impossible. Maybe we can find the answer in Chahnn this time. It was one of the biggest cities of the Ancients."

"I've never seen it," Captain Brown said.

BENSON grunted. "I did, once. Years ago. Tremendous! The scientific achievements they must have had! And nobody knows what happened to the Ancients. They just vanished, and their machines kept running till they'd used up their power—and stopped. So there's no trace left. We've located the fuel chambers, but in every case they've been empty. Experiments have been made—unsuccessfully."

"You still think my translation of the Harro Panel was wrong, eh?" Paula put in.

"I do," Commander Benson said. "It was a variable cipher. No one else agrees with you that it was a code map."

"Ever heard of a double code?"

"I'm sorry," Benson said shortly. "We've settled all this. The Black Forest is impassable. We can't risk our chance of success on a wild goose chase."

Beside the pilot, Garth's mouth twisted sardonically. He had an idea, now, what Carver Brown and Paula were after. The secret of the Ancients' power-source. Well, it might be found in the Black Forest. Anything might. Including the lost race of the Zarno, and . . . His eyes went hard. Not yet would he let himself believe Doc Willard was still alive. The most he could hope for was an answer to that question—the tormenting problem of whether or not he had killed Willard.

Lost in his absorption, he snapped out of it scarcely in time as the truck-cat skidded on slick ice.

"Hard left! Sand the treads!" Instinctively his hand flashed to the right lever, releasing a sprinkling of sand that provided traction. He held it down while the pilot fought the wheel. They lurched,

swung half around, and found level surface again. Through the window Garth could see a twenty-foot-wide funnel, sloping down to a black hole at the center.

"What was it?" the pilot asked.

"*Creethas*, the natives call 'em, but that doesn't mean much. Six-foot insects. Poisonous. They dig traps like ant-lions on Earth, pits with sloping sides. Once you skid on the ice, you slip on down to the hole at the bottom."

"Dangerous?"

"Not to us, in here. But we might have damaged the engine."

"Keep your eyes open after this, Garth," Commander Benson said sharply.

"Okay." Garth was silent. The truck-cat drove on, leading the procession.

The vehicles were fast. On level ground they raced, hitting eighty m.p.h. sometimes. By Jupiter-set they had reached Chahnn. Paula, for one, was disappointed.

"I expected a city," she told Garth as they stared around at the mile-square block of black stone, raised a few feet above ground level, its surface broken by a few structures oddly reminiscent of the subway kiosks of two centuries ago.

"It's all underground," Garth said. He was feeling shaky, needing a shot or two of liquor. But there was none. In lieu of it, he borrowed a cigaret from the girl and idled about, watching the men make camp.

THE ROOMY truck-cats provided accommodations for sixty men without crowding. It wasn't necessary to set up tents. Indeed, in that icy air, only "warmer" tents, heated by induced current in their metallic fabric, would have been feasible. The trucks, however, could be heated easily and were air-conditioned. Garth walked over to a kiosk and peered into the black depths. Chahnn lay below, the gigantic, complicated city of the Ancients.

Through Chahnn was the road to the Black Forest—the only road they could use, under the circumstances.

Garth shivered and went in search of Brown. He was feeling shakier than ever. Vividly in his mind was a picture he did not want to remember—a man stretched on an altar, a knife at his breast. . . .

He found Brown beside one of the trucks, looking into the darkness.

"Captain—"

"Huh? Oh, Garth. Say, Paula—Miss Trent took a flashlamp and went down into Chahnn to do a bit of exploring. I was thinking of going after her. Any danger down there?"

Garth shook his head. "It's a dead city. She'll be okay."

"Unless she gets lost."

"She won't. There are markers pointing to the outlets. How about a drink? I could use one."

Scowling, Brown nodded and pushed Garth into the truck. "I bunk in here, with the Commander. You'll have to find a place with the men, somewhere. Oh, by the way—" He pushed folded slips into Garth's hand. "Here's the rest of that forty. And here's a drink."

Garth gulped brandy better than any he had tasted in years. He didn't bother with a glass. Brown watched him with an almost imperceptible curl of the lip.

"Thanks . . . When do I get that ten thousand?"

"When we're back here. I don't trust you quite enough to let you have it now."

Garth wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, considered, and drank again. "I won't run out on you. You're after that Ancients' power-source, aren't you?"

Brown's eyes narrowed a bit. "Any of your business?"

"Not in the way you mean. But I know the Black Forest. I might be able to give you some ideas, if I'm not left too much in the dark. Still, I can guess a little. I know you expect to run into the Zarno."

"Yeah?"

Garth made an impatient gesture. "Hell, why did you want me as a guide? It wasn't only because I knew the Forest. I can speak the Ancient Tongue—the same language the Zarno are supposed to use. You'll want me to palaver with them."

"Maybe." Brown went to the back of the truck and found a fresh pack of cigarets. "We can talk about that later."

"We ought to talk now. I know what sort of equipment you'll need in the Forest. If you run out on Benson half-equipped, it'll be just too bad."

The door swung open, admitting a blast of frigid air. Commander Benson stepped in, his lips tight and hard, his eyes blazing. Brown, at the end of the chamber, swung

around, a sudden, surprised tenseness in his attitude.

"I don't think you'll do any running out on me, Captain," Benson said.

Brown flashed Garth a glance. "Damn you," he half-whispered. He took a step forward, tigerishly menacing.

BENSON pulled a gun from his pocket. "Don't move," he said. "Hold it—right there. I thought you'd given up that crazy idea you and Paula had, but apparently—" He shrugged. "Well, I'll have to put you and the girl under guard. No one in this outfit's heading for the Black Forest if I can help it."

Brown's hand hovered in midair.

"Don't try it," Benson said. "Keep your gun where it belongs. The sound of a shot wouldn't help you any." He stepped back, his mouth opening in a shout that would summon others.

Brown, at the other end of the truck, could not have reached him in time, but the Commander had forgotten or ignored Garth. That was a mistake. Garth was only a few feet from Benson, and he galvanized into unexpected action. He sprang, one hand clamping over the gun, the other, clenched, driving in a hard, short jab at Benson's chin.

There was strength in that punch, and it connected at the right point. Had Garth not been gripping the Commander's hand, the latter would have gone backward, out of the truck.

"Knockout!" Brown said tonelessly. He was suddenly beside Garth, yanking Benson forward. "Shut the door. Quick."

Garth obeyed. Turning, he saw the Captain kneeling beside Benson's motionless form. After a moment Brown looked up.

"He'll come out of it soon. Maybe too soon. Get me those straps from the corner."

Garth did that, and then had another drink. He felt lousy. He watched Brown bind the Commander and thrust the lax figure out of sight, under a bunk.

"That does it," Brown said, rising. "We're in the soup now. But—it was lucky you hit him when you did."

"What now?"

"We start for the Black Forest before Benson wakes up. I'm second in command. I'll get my own men, and we'll

jump the gun." Brown's eyes were excited.

"Equipment?"

"We'll take what we can. Weapons, mostly. Stay with me."

They went out of the truck into the soft light of four moons, two large, two tiny. Fourfold shadows paced them over the icy slick. Garth hurried off to find his medical kit. By the time he returned, Brown had mustered his men and was waiting. He gave Garth a brief glance.

"Okay. Morgan—" He turned to a giant in uniform. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. As soon as we find Miss Trent. 'Bye."

"'Bye, sir."

Garth led the way into one of the kiosks. Lamps were flashed on. A spiral ramp led steeply down.

In an undertone Brown said, "I told Morgan Commander Benson sent me to find Paula Trent—that she was lost in the city. So we're safe till—"

"We're safe till we leave the underground passage," Garth said. "After that, twenty miles across open ground. Has Benson got planes?"

"Portable ones, yeah."

"Then we'd better do that twenty miles at night."

The ramp ended. Before them was a gigantic room where their tiny lamps were lost. Here and there enigmatic shadows loomed, the dead, fantastic machines of the Ancients that had once made Chahnn alive and powerful.

GARTH went directly to an opening in the wall, Brown and his ten men following, and entered a short tunnel. At one spot he paused, ran his finger over a panel of smooth metal, and pressed. A black oval opened silently.

"Here's the way. They won't follow us beyond this point."

Brown nodded. "Sampson, get the men inside. Wait here for me. I'll be back as soon as I can."

A burly, beak-nosed fellow with a cast in one eye and flaming red hair saluted casually. "Right. Come on, boys. Hop through. Mind your packs."

Garth stared at Brown. "What d'you mean? Where—"

The Captain said, "We're taking Paula Trent with us."

"No! It's nearly suicide for us—she couldn't make it at all."

"She's tougher than you think. Besides, she's got the map. And she's an archaeologist. I can't read the Ancients' lingo. Can you?"

Garth shook his head. "I can speak it, that's all. But—"

"If we find what we're after, we'll need Paula Trent. She's down here somewhere. Let's go find her."

"I tell you—"

Brown brought out a gun and leveled it.

"Find her. Or I'll find her myself, and we'll head for the Black Forest without you. Because you'll be dead. I haven't come this far to let you stop me. And chivalry looks a bit funny on a guy like you."

Sudden murder-light flared in the pale eyes.

"Find her!" Brown whispered. "And—fast!"

III

GARTH knuckled under. There was nothing else to do. He knew Brown wouldn't hesitate to kill him, and, after all, what the devil did Paula Trent mean to him? Her life was unimportant, compared to the hopeless quest that had quickened in his mind, despite himself.

For Doc Willard might still be alive. Even if he wasn't, there was that notebook the Doc had always carried around with him—a book that contained the medico's theories about the Silver Plague. Even if that ghastly dream-like memory were not merely delirium—even if Garth, witless and unknowing, had killed Willard—there was always that dim, desperate chance that the cure for the Plague might be found in the Black Forest.

So—damn Paula Trent! She didn't matter, when the lives of millions might depend on Garth's penetrating the jungle that had baffled him for five years.

Without a word he turned and started back, Brown keeping close beside him. The huge chamber loomed before them, filled with its cryptic shadows. There was time now to see what they had missed in their quick flight a few moments ago—though not much time, for pursuit might start at any minute.

Dead silence, and darkness, broken by the crossing beams of the brilliant lamps. Garth listened.

"Hear anything?"

Brown shook his head.

"Nothing."

"Okay. We'll try this way."

Then went into a passage that sloped down, ending in a vaulted room larger than the first. Brown swung up his gun abruptly as a figure seemed to leap from blackness in the ray of the lamp. Garth caught his arm.

"Robot. Unpowered. They're all over the city."

The robots—slaves of the Ancients, Garth thought, who had died with them, lacking the fuel that could quicken them to life. No Earthly scientists had ever been able to analyze the construction of the machines, for they were built of an alloy that was apparently indestructible. Acid and flame made no impression on the smooth, glittering black surface.

This one, like all the others, was roughly man-shaped, nearly eight feet tall, and with four arms, the hands extended into limber jointed fingers almost like tendencies. From the mask-like face complex glassy eyes stared blankly. It stood motionless, guarding a world that no longer needed guardians.

With a little shrug Garth went on, his ears alert for sounds. From the walls bizarre figures in mural panels watched. Those murals showed a world of incredibly advanced science, Garth knew. He had seen them before. He spared them not a glance now.

The machines—

What were they? They loomed like dinosaurs in the endless chain of high-domed vaults. They had once given Chahnn power and life and strength. The murals showed that. The Ancient Race had used antigravity—a secret unknown to Earthmen—and they had created food by the rearrangement of atomic patterns, not even requiring hydroponic tank cultures. They had ruled this world like gods.

And they had passed with no trace, leaving only these silent monuments to their greatness. With the power of the Ancients, Earth's lack of fuel-reserves would not matter. If the secret of atomic power could be found again, these machines would roar

into thundering life—and machines like them would rise on Earth.

Power and greatness such as civilization had never known! Power even to reach the stars!

And—Garth thought wryly—a power that would be useless unless a cure for the Silver Plague could be found.

HE WAS almost running now, his footsteps and Brown's echoing hollowly in the great rooms. Silently he cursed Paula Trent. There were other levels below, many of them, and she might be down there—which would make the task almost impossible.

A distant flicker of light jerked Garth to a halt. He switched off his lamp, motioning for Brown to do the same.

It came again, far away, a firefly glimpse.

"Paula?" the Captain said.

"Guess so. Unless they're after us already."

"Take it easy, then."

They went on, running lightly on their toes. The light had vanished, but Garth knew the way. Suddenly they came out of a short tunnel into one of the great rooms, and relief flooded Garth as he saw Paula's face, pale in reflected light, a dozen feet away.

Simultaneously a faint sound came rhythmically—like dim drums.

Garth said sharply, "Hear that? Men coming down a ramp. Get the girl and let's go!"

But Paula was already coming toward them, blinking in the glare. "Who's that? Carver? I—"

Brown gripped her arm. "There's no time to talk now, Paula. We're in a jam. Keep your mouth shut and come along. Garth, can you get us back to that secret passage?"

"Maybe. It'll be blind luck if we make it. Turn your lamps out and link hands. Here." He felt Paula's firm, warm palm hard against his, and remembrance of Moira was suddenly unexpectedly painful. He had not seen an Earthgirl for years. . . .

What of it, now? Garth moved cat-footedly forward, leading the others. He went fast. Once or twice he clicked on his light briefly. They could hear the noise of the search-party now, and a few times, could see distant lights.

"If they find that open panel—" Brown whispered.

"Keep quiet."

Garth pressed them back into an alcove as footsteps grew louder. Luck stayed with them. The searchers turned off at another passage. After that—

It was like a nightmare, a blind, stumbling race through the blackness of Chahn, with menace hiding everywhere. Garth's hand was slippery with perspiration against Paula's by the time he stopped, his light clicking on and off again almost instantly.

"This is it," he said. "The panel's shut."

"Good. Sampson must have had sense enough to close it. Unless—"

Garth found the spring and pressed it. He flashed his light into the darkness, to see the familiar faces of Brown's men staring at him. The Captain thrust him forward. Paula was instantly beside him, and then Brown himself was through the oval gap.

"They're coming," he murmured. "How in hell does this work?"

"Here." Garth didn't use his light. Under his deft fingers the panel slid back into place, shutting off the noise of approaching steps. He gasped a little with relief.

"Okay," he said in a natural voice. "These walls are sound-proof. We can use our lights. We'll have to."

"What happened?" Paula's voice said.

"You said we were in a jam, Carver. Well?"

"We'll talk as we go. Garth, you first. Paula, stay with me. Sampson, bring up the rear, will you?"

GARTH obediently set out down the sloping tunnel, scarcely listening to Brown's explanation. There were side branches to the passage here and there. He had to use his memory, which seemed less accurate than he remembered. Once he almost blundered, but caught himself in time.

Brown said, "Garth, we've got thirty miles of tunnel and twenty more above ground till we hit the Forest. Right? This is rough going. We won't get out of here till daylight. So we'd better camp in the passage, at the other end, till tomorrow night."

"We don't have to do that," Garth grunted. "This isn't Earth. Jupiter won't rise for thirteen hours."

"The men have heavy packs." Brown shifted his own big one uncomfortably. "Fifty miles is quite a way. Still, the quicker we reach the Forest, the safer we'll be."

"There's a river." Garth's voice was doubtful. "We might use that."

"Would it help?"

"Yeah. But it's dangerous."

"Why?"

"Spouts. Geysers. The water's apt to explode under you any time. And there are big lizards—"

"Would it take long to make a raft?"

Garth shook his head. "*Lata*-trees are better than balsa, and they grow on the banks. Plenty of vines, too. But—"

"We'll do that, then," Brown said decisively. "Speed it up. We've got thirteen hours. We can make it, all right."

Garth didn't answer.

After that it was pure monotony, a dull driving march through a bare tunnel, up slopes and down them, till leg muscles were aching with fatigue. Garth dropped into a state of tired apathy. He had no pack to carry, but nevertheless his liquor-soaked body rebelled at the unaccustomed exertion. But he knew that each step brought him closer to his goal.

The thoughts swung monotonously through his brain. Doc Willard. The notebook. The cure. The Plague. Maybe —maybe—*maybe!*

If he got through—if he found the notebook—if it had the cure—that was what he wanted, of course.

But suppose he also found the skeleton of Doc Willard on an altar, with a knife-hilt protruding from the ribs?

He couldn't have killed Doc consciously. That was unthinkable. Yet the damnable influence of the Noctoli pollen did odd things to a man's mind.

Doc Willard — Moira — the Silver Plague—

Half asleep, aching with exhaustion, he slogged ahead, moving like an automaton. And, whenever he slowed his pace, Brown's sharp voice urged him on faster.

Grudgingly the Captain allowed them rest periods. But by the time they reached the tunnel's end the men were panting and sweating, and both Paula and Garth were near exhaustion. Thirty miles at a fast

pace, with only occasional rests, is wearing work.

THEY emerged from the passage to find themselves on the slope of a rocky hillock. Low ridges rose around them, silhouetted in triple-moonlight. A whitish haze hung close to the ground, filling the hollows like shining water.

Instinctively Brown looked up. A meteor, drawn by the immense gravity of Jupiter, flamed across the sky—that was all. And that was a familiar enough sight.

Garth, reeling with fatigue, nodded. "River—down there. Half a mile. The fog's thicker—"

"Okay. Let's go."

This lap of the journey was nearly the hardest. But the low roar of the river steadily grew louder as they stumbled on, the luminous mist lapping their ankles, their knees, their waists. It closed above their heads, so that they moved in a ghostlike, shadowless world in which the very air seemed dimly lighted.

Trees were visible. Garth, almost spent, searched for a shelving beach, found it, and dropped in a limp heap. He saw Paula sink down beside him. The men threw off their heavy packs with relief.

Brown—the man was made of rawhide and steel!—said, "I'll need help to make a raft. The boys that feel tired can keep their eyes open for pursuit planes. I don't think the Commander would send out truck-cats at night, but he'll use searching planes."

"They can't see us in this fog," Paula said faintly.

"They could hear us, with their motors muffled. So we'll work fast. Garth!"

"Yeah. What?"

"What trees do we want?"

Garth pointed. "*Lata*. Like that one, over there. They're easy to cut down, and they float. You'll find tough vines all around here." He forced the words out with an effort. Brown mustered eight of his men, including the red-haired Sampson, and led them away. The sound of ringing axes presently drifted back.

Two others had been stationed on hillocks, above the low-lying fog, to watch for planes. Garth, alone with Paula, was almost too tired to be conscious of her presence. He heard her voice.

"Cigaret?"

"Thanks. . . ." Garth took one.

"Sorry I can't offer you a drink."

"So am I," Garth grunted. He could feel her eyes on him. He drew the smoke deep into his lungs, exhaling luxuriously.

"Got a gun?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Oh—things come out of the river sometimes. Hunting water-lizards, carnivorous. You learn to sleep with one eye open on Ganymede."

"It's a funny world," Paula acknowledged. "Once it was highly civilized. Now it's gone back to savagery."

"Conditions are bad here. Too vigorous. Jupiter gives light but not much heat. Animals and plants have to be tough to survive. This is summer-season, but it's plenty cold."

"How much do you know about the Zarno?" she asked abruptly.

Garth blinked. "Not much. Why?"

"Not many people have ever seen them. I'm wondering. I managed to translate some inscriptions from Chahnn. . . . The Zarno aren't human, are they?"

Garth didn't answer. Paula went on.

"The Ancients knew them, though. They tried to educate them—like Rome colonizing savage races. That's probably why the Zarno are supposed to speak the Ancient Tongue."

"They do."

"And then the Ancients died out—somehow. The Zarno were left. They became barbarous again. I wish I knew what they were like. Natives who've seen them don't seem able to describe the creatures. They wear shining armor, don't they?"

GARTH closed his eyes, trying to remember. A vague, dim picture was growing in his mind—man-like figures that glowed, faces that were craggy, hideous creatures. . . .

"I've seen them," he said, "but I've forgotten. The Noctoli poison—it wrecked my memory."

"You don't recall anything?"

"I—" Garth rubbed his forehead. "Not human—no. Creatures like living statues, shining and moving. . . . I don't know."

"Silicate life?" Paula theorized thoughtfully. "It's possible. And it might evolve on a planet where conditions are so tough

for survival. Such creatures wouldn't be affected by the Noctoli pollen, either, would they?"

"No. Or they've built up resistance. The virus is active only in daylight, when the flowers are open. I don't know why. Before we go too far into the Black Forest I'll have to give everyone antitoxin shots—everyone but me. The pollen doesn't work on me any more."

They were silent, resting. It seemed only a moment before Brown appeared, announcing that the raft was ready.

"It's a makeshift job, but it's strong," he said. "Listen, Garth, what about the planes spotting us on the river? We'll be an easy target."

"They wouldn't fire on us?"

"No. But they'd use sleep-gas, and nab us when we drifted ashore. We don't want that."

Garth rose, his muscles aching. "It's a chance. Most of the time there'll be fog on the river. That'll help." He found his medical kit and shouldered it. "I'm ready."

The men were already on the raft, a big platform of light, tough *lata*-logs bound together by vines. Garth took his place near the pile of equipment in the center. "Keep to midstream," he cautioned. "Watch for bubbles breaking ahead. Swing wide of those. Waterspouts."

The raft slid out from the bank, long poles guiding it. Water washed aboard and slipped away as the platform found its balance. Presently they were drifting downstream in the dimly-lighted fog, the black river murmuring quietly beneath them.

Garth kept his gaze ahead. It was hard to see in the faint, filtered light of the moons, but a ray-lamp would have been betraying to any planes that might be searching above.

"Swing left. Hard," he called.

The men obeyed. Oily bubbles were breaking the surface. As the raft moved toward the bank, a sudden geyser burst up from the river, a spouting torrent that tipped the platform dangerously and showered its occupants with icy spray.

Garth met Brown's eyes. "See what I mean?" he remarked.

"Yeah. Still, if that's all—"

The river flowed fast. Once or twice the plated back of a giant saurian was visible, but the water-reptiles did not

attack, made wary, perhaps, by the bulk of the raft. There were other waterspouts, but the men soon became adept at avoiding them.

Sometimes they drifted through fog, sometimes the mists were dissipated by winds, though not often. During one of the latter periods a faint droning drifted down from above. It was the worst possible timing, for the two larger moons were directly overhead, blazing down on the river. The stub-winged shape of a plane loomed against the starry sky.

Brown said sharply, "Drop flat. Don't move." He forced Garth and Paula down. "No, don't look up. They'd see our faces."

"They can't miss us," Sampson muttered. "There's fog ahead."

The sound of the plane's motors grew louder. Abruptly there was a splash. Another. Something shattered on the raft.

"Hold your breath!" Brown snapped.

Garth tried to obey. A stinging ache had crept into his nostrils. His lungs began to hurt. The plane had spotted them—that was obvious. Sleep-gas works fast.

Another soft crash. Garth scarcely heard it. He saw a stubby, cruciform shadow sweep over the raft, as the plane swooped, and then the wall of silvery fog was looming up ahead. Paula gave a little gasp. Her body collapsed against him.

The fire in Garth's chest was blazing agony. Despite himself, he let breath rush into his lungs.

After that, complete blackness and oblivion.

IV

GARTH woke in reddish, dim twilight. Instantly he knew where he was, even before he sat up and saw the black boles of immense trees rising like pillars around him. The Forest!

"About time," Captain Brown's toneless voice said. "That sleep-gas put you under for hours."

Garth rose, glancing around. They were camped in a little clearing among the gigantic trees, and some of the men were heating their rations over radiolite stove-kits. From above, the crimson light filtered vaguely from a leafy roof incredibly far. The trees of the Black Forest were taller than California sequoias, and Jupiter-

light reached the ground faintly, through the ceiling of red leaves that roofed the jungle. Paula, Garth saw, was lying with her eyes closed not far away.

"She all right?"

"Sure," Brown said. "Resting is all. We got away from Benson's plane—hit that fog-bank just in time. You'd passed out, so I took a chance and kept going. After we reached the Forest, I landed the raft and headed inland a bit. So here we are."

Garth nodded. "That was wise. The river goes underground a half mile further. Any—accidents?"

Brown looked at him oddly. "This might be Yosemite, for all the danger I've seen so far. It's a picnic."

"That," Garth said, "is just why it's so bad. You don't see the trouble till after it's happened." He didn't explain. "Where's my kit?"

"Here. Why?"

"Before we go any further, we'll need shots. Antitoxin against the Noctoli pollen. The flowers don't grow on the edges of the Forest, but the wind carries their poison quite a ways sometimes." Garth rummaged in his kit, found sealed vials and a hypo, and carefully sterilized everything over a radiolite stove he commandeered from one of the men. After that, he administered the antiviral, first to Paula and last of all to Brown. He took none himself; he had acquired a natural immunity to the pollen.

There was barely enough to go around. Brown's shot was slightly less than the regular dosage, which vaguely worried Garth. But the Captain, annoyed by the delay, was anxious to talk about immediate plans.

"Benson might land at the edge of the Forest and come after us a mile or so. Not further. But we'd better start moving." He led Garth over to where Paula sat. "It's time for you to see the map."

The girl nodded in agreement. She took out a folded flex-paper and extended it. Garth squinted down in the red twilight.

"Map?"

"More like a treasure hunt," Paula explained. "There's a series of guide-points, you see. So far we're okay—*narva* means west, in the Ancient Tongue, doesn't it?"

"*Narva*," Garth gave the word a slightly different pronunciation. "Yeah. Well—

three *sallags* north-west to the Mouths of the Waters Below—”

“Mouths of the Singing Below, I made it.”

Garth shook his head. “I can’t read the stuff. I just know the spoken language. Read the whole thing out loud, so I can get it.”

Paula obeyed. Her pronunciation made some words unfamiliar to Garth, but by experiment he found what was meant.

“Uh-huh. A *sallag* is less than three miles, as far as I can judge. I think I know the place. It’s a hill honeycombed with little caves. You can hear water running underneath it.”

“That fits,” the girl agreed. “This won’t be so hard, after all.”

Garth grunted. He turned to Brown.

“I want a gun. And a knife. I’ll need both.”

“Sampson!”

The red-haired man approached, squinting. “Yeah?”

“Rustle up a knife and gun for Garth.”

“Check.”

Paula was staring at Garth. “You expect trouble, don’t you?”

“I do.”

She made a gesture. “This all seems so peaceful—”

“LISTEN,” Garth said, “the Black Forest is the worst death-trap in the System. Here’s why. The struggle for existence is plenty tough here. Brute strength isn’t enough, nor agility. A tiger or a deer wouldn’t last long here. In the Forest, the survival of the fittest means the plant or animal that can get the most food. That sort of thing has been going on here for a million years. The beasts developed super-quick reactions. They could smell danger a mile away. So they had to have strength, agility, and something else—to get close to their prey.”

Brown stared. “What?”

“Invisibility. Or its equivalent. Ever heard of protective coloration? Camouflage? Well, the creatures of the Forest are the most perfect camouflage experts that exist. They don’t simply trick your eyes, either. They trick the other senses. If you smell perfume, take it easy, or you’ll find yourself asleep, while your head’s being chewed off by a lizard that looks as

nasty as it smells good. If you see a path and it feels solid, don’t walk too far on it. Things have made that path. A carnivorous moss that feels exactly like smooth dirt underfoot—till their digestive juices start working. If you hear me yelling your name, take it easy. There are birds like harpies here that imitate sounds the way parrots do.”

Garth’s grin was tight. “You’ll find out. It’s camouflage carried to the last degree, for offense and defense. I know the Forest pretty well; you don’t. You haven’t developed a sort of sixth sense—an instinct—that tells you when something smells bad, even though it looks like a six-course dinner.”

“All right,” the Captain said. “This is your territory, not mine. It’s up to you.”

It was, Garth decided later as he led the way through the black columns of the trees, very much up to him. Brown and the others were tough, hard fighters, but they didn’t know the subtleties of this hell-hole, where death lurked everywhere disguised. He had got a drink from Sampson and his nerves were less jagged, but physical exhaustion still gripped him. He’d been on the skids for a long time, and was in rotten bad shape. But if the girl could stand it, he could.

It was warmer in the Forest; the trees seemed to exhale heat and moisture, and there was no snow on the ground. Great ebony pillars of giant trees, rising hundreds of feet into the air, made the place a labyrinth. And the deceptive reddish twilight made walking difficult, even to Garth’s trained senses.

There was trouble, though. When a gorgeously-colored butterfly, flame-red and green, fluttered down toward Paula, Garth hastily slapped at the insect with a thick leaf he was carrying. “Watch out for those,” he told the girl, nodding toward the crushed body. “They’re poisonous. Bad medicine.”

And once, as Brown was about to seat himself on a rounded grayish boulder, Garth whirled the man away just in time. A hole in the rock gaped open, and a pair of fanged mandibles snapped out, clicking together viciously. Garth put a bullet in the thing. It heaved itself up on spidery legs, revealing that the “rock” was a carapace covering an insect-like body. And it took a long time to die.

There were other, similar incidents. They had a bad effect on the men, even Sampson. The crew Brown had picked was tough, but the Black Forest was like distilled poison. It was easier to face a charging rhino than to travel through this ebony jungle where silent, secret death lurked concealed, in a diabolic masquerade.

That was the first day. The second was worse. The trees were thicker, and sometimes it was necessary to use *machete*-blades to hew through the tangled undergrowth.

ANOTHER DAY—and another—and another, following the clues on Paula's cipher map. They found the first guidepost, the hill honeycombed with caves, and from there went on to the east, camping at the edge of a ravine that dropped away into unplumbed darkness.

Camouflage-moss grew here, looking deceptively like solid ground. One of the men ventured too close to the edge of the cleft, and the moss crumbled beneath him, dropping him into a nest of the roots—twining, writhing cannibalistic serpents with sucker-disks that drank blood thirstily.

They got him out in time, luckily. But the men's nerves were jolted.

After that, day after day, constant alertness was vital. The party walked with guns and knives in their hands. Their footsteps rang hollow in the dead, empty silence of the Forest. . . .

It was only Garth's knowledge of the dark wilderness that got them through to the interior. After a week, he was further in than he had ever penetrated before, except when he had crashed the air-car with Doc Willard five years ago.

But they were getting closer—nearer! More and more often Garth remembered the black notebook that might hold the cure for the Silver Plague. For some indefinable reason he had come to feel that Paula's goal was also his.

It was logical enough. They were searching for a lost treasure-house of the Ancient Race, guarded, perhaps, by the Zarno. And Garth was certain that, during that period of partial amnesia, he and Willard had been captives of the Zarno. He had been drugged with the Noctoli poison by day, but at night he had wakened in a bare cell with his friend—a cell with walls of metal, he

recalled. It had been windowless. Lighted by a faint glow from one corner.

It checked. A ruin, once built by the Ancients, now inhabited by the Zarno.

If he could find that notebook—

He always stopped there. He knew what he might also discover—the skeleton of Willard, stretched on an altar. That picture always made his stomach go cold and tight.

That night Brown complained of a splitting headache. They camped near a stream, and Garth accompanied the Captain down to the bank, with canvas pails. Jupiter was invisible—they had not seen the sky for a week—but the red light was fading.

"Not too close," Garth cautioned. "Let me test it first."

Brown stared at him. "What now? I'm getting to expect anything here." The man's expressionless face showed signs of strain and exhaustion. He had no nerves, apparently, but the gruelling journey had told on him nevertheless.

Garth used his knife to cut down a sapling. He impaled a leaf on its point and extended it gingerly over the dark water. After a moment he felt a shock like a striking fish, and the pole was nearly wrenched from his hands. And he wrestled with it, Brown's hands gripped the sapling.

"What the devil! Garth—"

"Let it go. I was only testing, anyway." The pole was dragged into the water, where it thrashed about violently for a few moments.

"What is it?"

GARTH was searching through the underbrush for something. "Water-snakes. Big ones—perfectly transparent. They wait for some animal to come along and take a drink. Then—bang!" He nodded. "Here we are. We'll find a lot of the Noctoli flowers from now on."

He brought out a bloom nearly a foot in diameter, with leaves of pulpy, glossy black, a thick powdering of silver in its cup. "This is Noctoli, Captain. Looks harmless, doesn't it?"

"Yeah." Brown rubbed his forehead. "The pollen gives you amnesia?"

"In the daytime, when it's active. It's phototropic—needs light. Jupiter can't have set yet, so this ought to work." Garth found another pole, speared the flower on

its tip, and extended the blossom over the water. He shook the silver dust into the stream.

"It works fast. The snakes will be paralyzed in a few seconds. The current carries off the pollen, we dip up the water we need—and that's that."

Paula appeared through the bushes, glancing around warily. In the last week everyone had learned to be alert always. Lines of fatigue showed on her pale face. Red-gold hair was plastered damply on her forehead.

"Carver—"

"What's up?"

She glanced at Garth. "The men. Sampson's talking to them."

Brown's rat-trap mouth clamped tight. "That so? Sampson shoots off his mouth too much. What's the angle?"

"I think they want to go back."

Garth, dipping up water in the canvas buckets, said, "We've only three more days to go, unless we run into bad country."

"I know. But—they're armed."

"I'll talk to 'em," Brown said quietly. He lifted two of the pails and started up the path, Paula and Brown trailing him. Presently they reached the clearing where camp had been made.

The men weren't cooking. Instead, they were gathered in a knot around Sampson, whose blazing red hair stood up like a beacon. Brown put down his burden and walked toward them.

They broke up at sight of him, but didn't scatter. Sampson's hand crept imperceptibly toward his holster.

"Trouble?" Brown asked.

Sampson squinted at him. "No trouble. Except we didn't know the Forest would be as bad as it is."

"So you want to go back?"

"You can't blame us for that," Sampson said, hunching his heavy shoulders. "It's only dumb luck that's kept us alive so far. We didn't bargain for this, Captain."

"I told you what to expect."

"All you said was that it'd be dangerous. None of us knew the Forest. Those damn bloodsucker plants are the worst. They reach out at a guy everywhere he turns. And the other things—we can't get through, Captain! You ought to be able to see that yourself!"

"Nobody's been killed so far."

"Blind luck. And Garth, too. He knows this country. If we didn't have him, we wouldn't have lasted a day."

"We've got him," Brown said crisply. "So we're going on. Only three more days, anyhow. That's enough. Start cooking your rations." He turned his back on Sampson and walked away. The red-haired giant hesitated, scowling. Finally he shrugged and glanced around at the others.

That broke the tension. One by one the men scattered to prepare food.

Only Garth was gnawed by a persistent, deep-rooted fear. He didn't admit it, even to himself. But he watched Brown closely that night, and finally unpacked his medical kit and carefully searched it for something he knew wasn't there.

He was dreading the next morning.

V

SLOW reddish dawn brightened over the Forest. Garth felt someone shaking him. He grunted, stirred, and opened his eyes to see Paula's white face, and, behind her, Sampson.

"Yeah. What's wrong?" He scrambled out of his blankets, blinking. The girl, pale to the lips, pointed toward a recumbent figure.

"Carver. Captain Brown. He's—I don't know!"

Sampson said gruffly, "Looks like he's dead. The men on guard duty said he didn't move once all night."

Icy bands constricted suddenly around Garth's heart. Without answering he got his kit and went over to examine Brown. The man lay motionless, his breathing normal, but a deep flush on his brown cheeks.

"It isn't the Plague, is it?" Sampson asked, his voice not quite under control.

Garth shook his head. "Hell, no! It's—" He hesitated.

Paula caught his arm. "What? Some insect poisoned him—one of those butterfly-things?"

Garth carefully repacked his kit. He didn't look up.

"He's got a dose of the Noctoli pollen. That's all. It's not fatal. He'll come out of it after he leaves the Forest, or after he builds up immunity."

"How long would that take?"

"A month or more."

Garth bent over the apparently sleeping man. "Get up, Brown," he said insistently. "Hear me? Get up?"

The Captain stirred. His eyes opened, blank and unseeing. He drew himself from his blankets and rose, looking straight ahead. Paula shrank back with a little gasp. There was a flurry of movement among the men in the background.

"He'll be all right tonight. The poison only works in the daytime—I've told you that."

"We can't march at night," Paula said. "Not—here!"

"I know. It's impossible. Our lights would attract the butterflies—and plenty of other things."

Sampson whirled on the others. "Pack your equipment! We're getting out of here, fast!"

They hurried to obey. Paula got in front of Sampson as he turned, and the giant stopped, blinking at her.

"You can't leave the Captain here, Sampson."

"We'll carry him, then. But we're getting out."

Garth moved to Paula's side. "You won't need a litter. He can walk. Noctoli poison works like hypnotism. You're semi-conscious, but your will's in abeyance. If anyone tells Brown to follow us, he'll do it."

Paula was biting her lip. "We can't go back now. We've only three days to go."

"Look," Sampson said grimly, "why in hell should we commit suicide? Suppose we head on for three days. We reach this lost city of yours, or whatever it is. What then? We're in the middle of the Black Forest. Another thirteen days to get out! It's too much of a gamble. We're leaving now, and you can come along or stay here—suit yourself!" He turned away.

L EFT ALONE, Paula looked helplessly from the motionless, staring figure of Brown to Garth.

"Carver!"

He didn't move. Garth grinned wryly.

"He'll obey commands, that's all. He won't wake up till tonight."

Paula clenched her hands. "We've got to go on! We've got to! If we go back now—"

"Commander Benson will clap us in the brig, eh?"

She looked at him angrily. "It isn't only that. We'd lose our chance. You were right, Garth—we're after the power-source of the Ancients. The secret's hidden here, in the Black Forest. That cipher from Chahnn proved that—to me, anyway. Earth needs power, more than you can imagine. Without it, civilization will collapse—soon, too."

"Suppose we go on," Garth said slowly. "I didn't tell you this, but the reason the poison hit Brown was because my anti-toxin was too old. He had a short dose, too. The other men—well, they'll go under themselves in a day or so. You, too."

Blue smudges showed under the girl's eyes. "Oh," she said after a moment. "So it's like that."

"Just like that."

Paula's stubborn chin tilted up. "I don't care—there's still a way. We'll be all right at night, you said. Well, we'll do our traveling and fighting by night."

"Fighting?"

"The Zarno. Garth, we've got to do it, somehow. Once we find that power-source, we can use it! There'll be weapons the Ancients left, I'm sure of it. The murals at Chahnn showed they had weapons, strong enough to conquer the Zarno. If we can get those—"

"You're crazy," Garth said. "Plain crazy. What the hell do you expect me to do about it? Sampson would knock my block off if I tried to stop him now."

But he was thinking: we're losing more than a chance to find the Ancient's power-source. I'm losing my chance to find the cure for the Silver Plague.

"No," he said stubbornly.

Paula's lip curled. "I should have known better than to ask you for help. I'll handle this myself." She unholstered her gun.

Garth looked at her. She'd fail. She couldn't handle these ten hard-shelled fighters, headed by Sampson. She'd fail. And, in the end, she'd go back to Earth, in the brig, back to the certain death of the Silver Plague. Oh, it might miss her, of course. But it might not.

Paula would die as Moira had done, years ago.

Garth shrugged and slapped the girl's weapon down. "Stay out of this," he commanded, and turned away, walking across the clearing to where Sampson and

the others were shouldering their kits.

The red-haired giant looked up at Garth's approach. "Step it up," he said. "We're in a hurry."

"I'm not going."

Sampson's furry brows drew together. "The hell you're not. We need you!"

There was a band of ice around Garth's middle. "I know that. You can't get through without me. You'll never get out of the Forest alive. That's tough. Paula and I are going ahead, with Captain Brown. We're finishing what we started."

"You lousy so-and-so!" Sampson roared. His big hand reached out, clutching. Garth stepped back, drawing his pistol.

"Take it easy," he said under his breath. But there was a gun in Sampson's hand now. Behind the giant, the other men stirred angrily.

"You're coming with us!"

"Not alive. I won't be much good to you dead, will I?"

After a moment Sampson re-holstered his gun. He looked around at the others. Someone said, "We can get along without that son."

Sampson growled at him. "Shut up. We can't. You'd have been sucked dry by that spider-thing yesterday if Garth hadn't seen it in time. He knows where to walk in this hell-hole."

Garth didn't say anything. He waited, holding his gun with casual lightness.

Sampson glared. "What do you want, then?"

"I want you to keep going—finish what you started."

"Then what?"

"We may find weapons—and other things."

"Suppose we don't?"

"Then we'll come back. I got you in here, and I'm the only man on Ganymede who can get you out."

Sampson's eyes narrowed. "Suppose we say yes. You can't keep a gun on us all the time. We might jump you. There are ways of making a man do things he doesn't want to do."

"Sure," Garth admitted, "you could torture me. Only that wouldn't help."

Sampson's gaze flicked past to the girl. Garth said quickly. "That wouldn't help either. Here's why. The antitoxin I gave you was too old. It isn't working the way

it ought. Captain Brown was the first man to go under. But within three days, at the latest, every damn one of you will have Noctoli poison!"

Garth thought Sampson was going to shoot him then and there. A yell went up from the men.

Sampson's lifted hand quieted them. The giant was pale under his spaceburn.

"Is that straight?"

Garth nodded. "It's on the beam. Yeah. It'll take you a week to get out of the Forest, and you won't last that long, even if you force me to guide you. I don't think you can do that, anyway. But even if you did—within three days you'll be like the Captain. Walking dead men! You'll be okay at night, but you can't travel at night. By day you'll be living statues, sitting in the Forest waiting for the bloodsucker plants to come along and drain your blood, waiting for the poisonous butterflies to paralyze you and lay their eggs under your skin, waiting—you've seen what sort of things live in the Forest. Every day you'll be helpless. You can't run. Some night you'll wake up with your legs chewed off, or the butterfly maggots eating you alive. Like that? Well, that's what you'll get—and I'm the *only* guy that can save you!"

THE FACES of the men told Garth that his shots had gone home. The deadly menace of the forest, lurking always in the background, had worked into their nerves. Sampson's big hands clenched.

"Damn you!" he snarled. "You can't—"

Garth went on quickly. "I'm handing this to you straight. We're in a spot, sure, but we can get out of it. I can make more antitoxin, but it'll take a while. I can't do it while we're traveling. I need equipment. Here's what I'm proposing—we all keep going, the way we started. I'm immune to the pollen. If we move fast, we'll reach the lost city, or whatever it is, before you go under. Then I can start making antitoxin. We'll have to trap some small animals and allow time for incubation. But I'll be able to make fresh shots and neutralize the Noctoli pollen."

"It's too long a shot," Sampson said.

"Okay," Garth told him. "Suit yourself. Play it my way, or commit suicide." He turned and walked toward Paula, who had not moved from Brown's side.

Her eyes were steady on his. "Thanks. That was nice going—plenty nice, if you pull it off."

"It's suicide either way," Garth grunted. He began packing Brown's kit and his own.

Footsteps sounded. Garth didn't turn. He heard Sampson's deep voice, hoarse with repressed fear and rage.

"We're playing it your way, Garth. God help you if you make any boners!"

Sudden relief weakened Garth. He tried not to show it, though he realized that his hands were trembling.

"Fair enough," he said. "We'll march in ten minutes. Get the men ready."

Sampson muttered something and retreated. Garth slipped the pack on Brown's shoulders. The Captain, looking blankly ahead, didn't seem to notice.

"Keep your eye on him," Garth told Paula. "He'll be between us. He'll keep marching till we tell him to stop. See?"

She nodded, moistening her lips. "Y-yes. Is—that—going to happen to all of us?"

Garth said nothing. There wasn't anything to say.

But he knew, as he led the party away from the camp, how long a gamble he was undertaking. There were so many chances that he might fail! The odds were plenty tough—yet the stakes were equally high.

Had he known how difficult those odds were, Garth might not have risked it. For the Noctoli poison worked faster than he had guessed.

Meantime he guided ten sullen, fearful men, a walking corpse, and a girl deeper into the unexplored heart of the Black Forest. The Noctoli flowers breathed their poison from the underbrush, deadly and relentlessly.

VI

THAT DAY they met a new enemy: jet-black lizards, five feet long, that clung to the black tree-boles, perfectly camouflaged, till the party came close. Then the reptiles flashed toward them, fanged jaws gaping. Constant alertness was all that saved them—that, and the blazing guns that killed the monsters.

Presence of the lizards was no respite from the other perils. The bloodsucker plants were more numerous, and the camouflage-moss made deceptively inviting paths

through the red gloom. By dark, everyone was nearly exhausted, nerves worn to rags. Garth knew it would not take much for the men to explode into furious resentment against him.

Luckily, an hour after they had made camp, Captain Brown woke from his drugged trance, perfectly normal. But it took a while to make him understand what had happened.

For the first time Garth saw Brown lose his iron self-control, and then it was only for a moment. A flash of stark horror showed on the Captain's lean, hard face, to be gone instantly.

He lit a cigaret, his eyes brooding on Paula and Garth. Briefly he glanced past them to the men, preparing their rations.

"Uh-huh. Not so good. I suppose it's useless to think of traveling by night."

"It's impossible," Garth told him.

"You can make more antitoxin?"

"Sure—but not here. It's too dangerous. We've been safe so far because we've moved fast, camping at a different spot every night. If we holed up, we'd have a gang of monsters down on us in no time."

Brown considered. "It's a nasty business, having my own body go back on me. A bit of a shock. Well—" He let smoke drift from his nostrils. "Two more days ahead of us, eh? Then we reach the lost city."

"If it is a city. We don't even know that."

"But we do know there may be Zarno around. We'll have to arrive there soon after dark, so I'll be . . . conscious. If there's a fight, I want to be in on it. Why the devil didn't you test that antitoxin, Garth?" His voice was harshly angry.

Garth didn't answer. Brown had given him the rush act, but he wasn't making any excuses.

Paula said, "This isn't the best time to quarrel. You'd better talk to the men, Carver, so there'll be no trouble tomorrow."

"Yeah. Yeah, I suppose so."

Even the rebellious Sampson was convinced by Brown's well-chosen remarks.

They slept uneasily, with guards replaced every two hours, and the next day woke to find Captain Brown once more sunk into his Noctoli-trance. A few of the men complained of headaches.

By mid-morning Paula succumbed to the

poison. Garth did not realize at first what had happened. Then, turning, he saw the girl's blank face and wide eyes fixed straight ahead as she marched along, and knew that she was entranced by the Noctoli till nightfall. The exercise of walking, speeding metabolism, had hastened the action of the virus.

They went on. An hour later another man went under. Then another. By noon only five men, including Garth and Sampson, were still conscious.

Their difficulties increased proportionately. They had to be on guard every second. The Noctoli victims walked quietly in line, but they did not react to danger. If the tentacles of a bloodsucker plant flashed out, they wouldn't try to escape. Their instinct of self-preservation had been dulled and blanketed.

The afternoon was pure hell. Garth, Sampson, and one other man had to guard and lead the rest. Their guns crashed incessantly, it seemed.

When they camped at the onset of darkness, Sampson and Garth alone remained.

THE red-haired giant, swaying on his feet, squinted at Garth, his face haggard with exhaustion.

"Nice going," he said sardonically, after a time. "What now? Maybe we'd better cut our throats."

Garth managed a shaky grin. "We're still okay. And there's only one more day left. Tomorrow—we'll make it then. We've got to."

Unwilling admiration showed in Sampson's eyes. "You're dead on your feet. I don't see how the hell you keep up this pace. Anyhow—we can't go back now. That's settled, anyway."

"Yeah. The others will wake up after a while. We'll have to stay on guard till then."

They did, guns drawn, peering at the silent depths of the Forest around them, while the rest of the party lay motionless, helpless against attack.

After a time Sampson spoke. Garth could not see his face in the heavy gloom.

"What are you after, Garth?"

"Eh?"

"I had you ticketed wrong. A beachcomber. . . . There must be something plenty important where we're going, or you

wouldn't be so anxious to get there. What is it? Treasure, of course, but—jewels? Or what?"

Garth chuckled. "There may be. I don't know. Don't care."

"Hm-m." Sampson was silent, baffled. Garth's mind swung back to that ever-present question. Had he killed Doc Willard? Very soon, now, he might know the answer.

But that was important only to him. The vital point was the black notebook Doc had had with him.

After a time Captain Brown stirred and sat up. Then the others. The men were a little panicky, but the presence of Brown and Sampson calmed them.

Garth, relieved of guard duty, had fallen asleep almost instantly.

He woke at dawn. Red twilight filtered down from above. The others were lying motionless in their blankets. Sampson's big body was huddled at the base of a tree.

Wearily Garth got up and went over to the giant. "Sampson!" he called. "Wake up! We've got a job—"

He stopped. Sampson's eyes were open, fixed and blank, and his dark cheeks had a significant ruddy flush.

The Noctoli poison!—

Garth stepped back, white to the lips. A sudden, horrible sense of loneliness pressed down on him. In the jungle things seemed to move, closing in menacingly.

He was alone now.

Alone—with twelve helpless companions to guard!

Somehow—somehow!—he had to get them through. One more day, and they would be at their goal. They could not stay here, that was certain.

Garth searched Sampson's pack till he found a half-empty whiskey bottle. He poured the burning stuff down his throat, though it rocked him back on his heels. But he needed artificial stimulation; it was the only thing that could keep him going now.

It helped. Garth took Sampson's gun and stuck it in his belt. If his own jammed or ran out of ammunition, today, it would be unfortunate.

One more day.

One more day!

Somehow, he got Sampson, Brown and the others lined up. They would march when he gave the word. The hyp-

notic trance of the Noctoli pollen had turned them into robots.

Garth put Paula directly behind him. The sight of her wan, drawn face made him feel a little frightened, though not for himself. He was remembering Moira, who had died on Earth years ago.

Eleven men and a girl—and he was the only one who could save them.

Garth made sure that the packs were in place on the men's shoulders. He took another drink, pulled out one of the guns, and gave the command to march.

Like automatons the line followed him.

If the day before had been hell, this was double-distilled hell.

Within an hour, Garth's nerves were scraped raw. He had to be constantly alert. The wrenching strain of watching for camouflaged menace made his eyes ache. When movement came, he had to be ready. Ready to squeeze the trigger. . . .

He had to have eyes in the back of his head. For Sampson, at the tail of the procession, was as helpless as the others.

Liquor kept Garth going. Without it, he would have collapsed. By noon he was forced to call a halt, his eyes throbbing with the strain. But even then he could not relax. Danger waited everywhere.

He never remembered what happened that afternoon. He must have acted automatically, through blind instinct. But he got them through, somehow. . . .

It was like awakening from deep sleep. Garth was abruptly conscious that he was marching forward, his head moving rhythmically, his eyes searching the jungle. The red twilight was almost gone.

He whirled, to see Paula directly behind him, unharmed. The others were strung out in single file—all of them, with Sampson's red head at the end. None was missing.

Garth shivered. His body was aching like fire. A quick glance showed him that his clothes were ribboned, his skin scratched raw, a long slash along his ribs. It had been treated with antiseptic, he saw, though he did not remember administering first aid, nor what had caused the wound.

What had awakened him? He peered through the gloom, making out a dark bulk, regular in outline, ahead and to his left. A few paces further gave him the answer. It was a building, of black stone or metal,

no more than twelve feet high, and with an archway gaping in the nearest side.

Somehow it struck a chord of memory. They must be near their goal. No savages had built this structure. The Ancient Race?

The Zarno—they might be near by. It would not do to encounter them now, while the men were in their Noctoli trance. And here, in the Forest, they were without cover, at the mercy of the Zarno should they appear.

Garth reconnoitered quietly, leading the others, for he dared not leave them alone. The black building seemed untenanted. He could vaguely make out a flight of steps leading down into darkness, and, more important than that, the threshold itself was thick with dust and mould. The—temple—was empty.

Which made it a good place to hide. Garth was beginning to realize he could not keep going much longer, at least without collapsing. But soon after dark the others would recover from their trance.

He stepped warily across the threshold, into the gloom of the temple. Simultaneously the flooring sank almost imperceptibly beneath his feet, and a deep, brazen bell-note boomed out, hushed with distance, as though it came from underground.

Indecision held Garth motionless for a moment. That clang was a signal of some sort—a warning against trespassers? A warning to *whom*?

HE WAS answered quickly. A low cry came, harsh and oddly familiar. It was the first of many. Garth, hesitating on the threshold, uncertain which way the danger lay, instinctively reached out his arm and dragged Paula close. She came obediently to his side, her eyes seeing nothing. The others—they stood like frozen statues.

Something flashed amid the underbrush. The scarlet tangle of vines and leaves was torn aside, and a figure leaped into view.

A figure, man-like—yet not human!

At first glance it seemed to be a man in armor, more than six feet tall, and proportionately broad. Its body gleamed with reflected light. Neckless, its head was a hairless, shining ball whose only features were two oval, jet-black eyes. They were uncannily menacing.

A statue come to life! For the creature's

body was obviously not flesh—it was hard, rough and shiny as translucent glass. Silicate life!

Sprung from a silicon chemical base, as Earth life comes from carbon—but sentient, intelligent, and dangerous!

Others like it raced into view, pausing as they saw Garth and his companions. The first stepped forward. He had no mouth, but a circular diaphragm below and between his eyes vibrated rapidly, forming recognizable words.

"Al-khron ghanro ssel 'ri—"

It was the Ancient Tongue, which Garth had learned five years before, and never forgotten. It came back to him easily now. He was beginning to remember other things, too. These creatures—he had seen them before. The Zarno—

"We come in peace." He raised one hand, his nerves jolting, waiting for the answer. Presently it came.

"You are not a god. The others with you are not gods. We are the Zarno; we destroy. We guard the house of the gods till they return."

Another of the silicate creatures pushed forward. "Do you not know this being, Kharn? Eight *ystods* ago he came here with another like him. Do you remember?"

Kharn nodded slowly. "That is true. We did not slay them then, for we thought they were messengers from the gods. They pretended to be—we were not sure. This one escaped. The other went into the Darkness."

The other? Doc Willard? Garth felt his throat tighten.

"The—Darkness? What is that?"

"The place from which only the gods return," Kharn said slowly.

Did he mean—death? Before Garth could ask, the second Zarno spoke.

"They must be taken and sacrificed, Kharn."

Garth took out his gun. "Wait," he said sharply, as the Zarno moved forward. "We have weapons. We can destroy you."

"You do not speak the truth. Only the gods can destroy us. Ages ago they came here and built their temple and taught us to be wise. When they left us, we stayed on, to guard the sacred places."

Garth's mouth felt dry. "We are mes-

sengers from the gods—" he declared.

"It is not true." Kharn began to walk forward. "Take them!"

Garth knew he had lost.

IT WAS like a nightmare, the steady, relentless approach of the monstrous beings. Garth held his gun leveled. His arm tightened around Paula's shoulders.

"Keep back," he commanded, conscious of the uselessness of the words.

Instead, Kharn and the others walked on. The creature's shining arm lifted, clamped on Garth's shoulder. He fired.

Kharn did not seem to feel the bullet, though it had not missed. Garth squeezed the trigger again. The pistol jolted against his palm.

The Zarno were—invulnerable!

Garth fought, nevertheless. He could see the silicate men lifting his companions like sacks of meal, hoisting them to gleaming shoulders, and carrying them, unresisting, through the forest. Paula was torn from his grasp. Cursing, he struck out at Kharn's impassive, inhuman face with the revolver-butt. Useless! Nothing could harm these creatures of living stone.

Ignoring his struggles, Kharn prisoned Garth's arms and lifted him. Helpless, Garth was carried after the others. He forced himself to relax. A fury of impotent rage flooded him.

He battled it down. Better wait. A chance might come later; just now, there was none. Wait—

Through the forest they went, a score of the silicate creatures, striding like armored giants in the darkening red glow. Not far. A pillar of black metal loomed before them soon, broken by an archway. Two of the monsters guarded it. For a moment Garth mistook the monolith for one of the ebony trees; then he realized his error as they crossed the threshold and began to descend a spiral ramp.

Now there was light, a cool, silvery radiance that seemed to come from the walls. Kharn's footsteps thumped hollow, tirelessly. Sudden weakness made Garth dizzy. He caught a glimpse of a well around which the ramp wound, a pit dropping away to the heart of a world, it seemed.

Utter exhaustion struck him like a physical blow.

VII

HE REMEMBERED, dimly, what happened after that. It was like a series of fantastic visions, nightmare flashes of memory. At the bottom of the spiral was a cave, reminiscent of Chahnn and the other cities of the Ancients Garth had seen. Enigmatic machines loomed here and there. Unlike Chahnn, this city was lighted with the pale glow that came out of the walls and high-domed ceilings.

Cavern after cavern—peopled with the silicate creatures, filled with the dead machines of the Ancients! And, finally, an immense cave, its floor slanting up to a raised dais at one end. On the platform a throne of black metal stood, and seated upon it was a gigantic four-armed robot, larger than any Garth had ever seen before—standing, it would have been twelve feet tall, he judged.

Garth got only a glimpse of this. He was carried on swiftly to a smaller cavern where metal doors lined the walls. One of these was unlocked. He, with the other Earthmen, was carried within and dumped unceremoniously on the floor. The Zarno departed, clanging the door shut after them.

Then—silence.

Garth staggered to his feet, staring around. The cell was oddly familiar. He had been in it, or one like it, five years ago with Doc Willard. The silvery light came from the wall, and there was a grating in the door. That was all.

He reached the grating and peered out. Two Zarno were on guard not far away. The lock—it might be possible to pick it, Garth thought, but the silicate creatures were invulnerable. So that would do no good.

Captain Brown's clipped voice said, "Where the hell are we, Garth?"

"Huh? Oh, you're awake." Garth laughed harshly. "You should have waked up half an hour ago. Not that it would have done any good—"

Brown stood up stiffly. "What d'you mean? What's happened?"

The others were waking now. For a few moments the cell was a babble of questions. One of the Zarno came briefly to the grill in the door and looked in. Shocked quiet greeted him.

After he had gone, Garth took advantage of the silence to say, "I'll tell you what's been going on, and then I'm going to sleep. I'll go to sleep anyway, unless I talk fast. I'm dead beat."

Sampson squinted at the door. "Tough customers. Shoot, Garth. I've got a hunch we're in a bad spot."

"We are. Listen—" Briefly Garth explained what had happened.

There were questions and counter-questions.

"You can speak their lingo, eh?"

"That won't help, Brown."

"They can't be invulnerable."

"They are—to our weapons. Silicate life!"

"When will they—sacrifice us?" Paula asked, a little shaken, though she tried not to show it.

Garth shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe I can talk 'em out of it. God knows. They worship the gods—the Ancients, I suppose—but they know we're not gods. So that's that."

"Well—"

THEY talked inconclusively. Sampson casually wandered over to the door, found a twisted scrap of wire, and used it on the lock. After a while he called softly to the others.

"This thing's a snap. It won't keep us in here."

Garth came over. "There are guards. It's no use."

One of the Zarno approached and peered in through the grill.

"Kharn has said you will not be hungry long. Tomorrow you will all die. You eat, like the creatures of the forest, do you not?"

"What's he saying?" Sampson muttered.

"Nothing important." Garth switched to the Ancient Tongue. "It will be dangerous to kill us. We are messengers of the gods."

"We will believe that," the Zarno said, "when one of the gods tells us so." He nodded impassively and retreated.

Paula touched Garth's arm. "Isn't there any way—"

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not."

"There's light here. There's none in the other cities of the Ancients. That means

the power-source still works here. If we can find it—"

Garth couldn't look at her, knowing they were doomed to die the next day. He shrugged, turned away, and found an empty corner. Ignoring the others, he tried to relax on the hard floor. His brain just wasn't working now. It was fagged out. He had a vague hunch that there might be a way out—but he was too exhausted to follow it up now. A few hours' sleep was vital.

But he slept past dawn. When he awoke, he saw the others lying motionless, their eyes fixed in the blank stare of the Noctoli trance.

Glancing at the chronometer on Brown's wrist, Garth figured swiftly. It was past dawn. That meant there was little time left in which to act—provided action was possible. But sleep had refreshed him, though his muscles still ached painfully. He was beginning to remember what his hunch had been.

When he and Doc Willard had been captives, there had been guards only at night. During the long Ganymede day, none was necessary, for the Noctoli poison had been active then. By day, the Zarno thought, men of flesh were tranced and helpless. Unless—

Garth moved quietly to the door. Through the grill he saw the cave, empty of life. There were no guards. He was glad he had slept past dawn, so that the Zarno were able to believe him entranced like the others.

But what now? Escape? To where? There was still power in the lost city; perhaps the weapons of the Ancients still existed. Weapons stronger than guns to conquer the Zarno! But, regardless of that, it was necessary to find a hiding-place. This was the day of sacrifice.

Ironic thought—a hiding-place in an underground city teeming with the Zarno!

Garth shrugged. The door was locked, he discovered, and it took time to find the twisted wire Sampson had used. Even then, Garth was unable to manipulate the intricate tumblers. He scowled, chewing his lip, and eying the wire. Sampson's skilled fingers were necessary.

He roused the red-haired giant and led him to the door. Sampson looked straight ahead, his eyes dull. He obeyed when

Garth spoke—but that was all. Was his skill sufficiently instinctive to be used now?

There was only one way to find out. Garth put the wire in Sampson's hand.

"Unlock the door."

He had to repeat the command twice before Sampson understood. Then the big man bent, fumbling with the lock, working with agonizing slowness.

Hours seemed to drag past before Sampson straightened.

GARTH tried the door. It opened. The first step was accomplished, anyhow. The others would be more difficult. He was unfamiliar with the underground city. How the devil could he evade the Zarno and find a hiding-place? Alone, he would have a better chance. But he had twelve companions to take with him.

He spoke to each of them. "Follow me. You understand? Follow me till I tell you to stop. Move as quietly as you can."

Then he led them out of the cell.

The city, as he speedily learned, was a labyrinth. Luckily there were innumerable cross-passages. And all the cities of the Ancients had been built along a similar plan. Garth knew the layout of Chahnn, and that helped him now. But there were times when he had to move fast, and the others walked as though striding through water.

"Quick! In here! *Fast!*"

And they would follow him, into a side tunnel, while the heavy, metallic footsteps of the Zarno approached like the drums of doom.

But there was no place to hide permanently. Worst of all, a distant clanging sounded presently, and Garth guessed what that meant. The escape of the captives had been discovered.

Gingerly he skirted the huge cave where the dais was, glimpsing the giant robot in the distance, and shepherding his charges along a twisting corridor that led down. But the footsteps were growing louder. Garth was almost certain that they were following.

He increased his pace, with wary glances behind him. Unless he found a side passage soon, the swift Zarno would speedily overtake them.

"Faster! Move faster!"

The Earthmen tried to obey. Like automats they ran, their eyes fixed and staring, while the clamor of pursuit grew louder. Looking back, Garth saw a flash of shining movement. The Zarno!

"Faster!"

There were no side tunnels. They came out into a small cave, completely empty. It was a cul-de-sac. Light was reflected brightly from three walls.

The fourth wall was dead black—neither rock nor stone. It was like a jet curtain, blocking their path. Garth jerked to a halt, knowing the utter hopelessness of futility. They were trapped now.

The Zarno was pursuing, unmistakably.

Garth took out his useless gun. His face was set in grim lines. What good were bullets against the silicate creatures?

But waiting helplessly was far worse. At least he could try to fight.

He had forgotten to command his charges to halt. Glancing around, Garth saw something that made his eyes widen in incredulous amazement. Paula was walking toward the black curtain—the wall—

She stepped through it and vanished.

Brown followed her. Then another man. And another.

Last of all, Sampson, disappearing like a ghost through the blackness!

Heavy footsteps whirled Garth about. Down the corridor he could see the flashing gleams that heralded the Zarno. His tight grin was a grimace.

"The hell with you, pals," he said softly—and turned again. He raced in pursuit of the others.

Leaped through the dark curtain!

THERE was an instant of grinding, jolting shock that left him blind. He staggered, caught himself, and saw that he was in a passage that led toward a distant brightness. Silhouetted against the glow were the moving figures of his companions.

He sprinted after them. But he did not overtake them till they had emerged in a cavern unlike any he had seen before.

"Okay! Stop! Stop, that's right."

They halted, motionless. Garth looked behind him, but there was no trace of the Zarno.

This cavern was lighted like the others. But there were fewer machines. Row after row of the giant four-armed robots stood

like an army on the dark-metal floor. The walls were jeweled, thousands of pearly disks studding them. A low humming came from a machine nearby, a tripod with lenses surmounting a square box.

Garth walked through it. He hesitated, glanced around again, and then peered through the lenses.

A voice seemed to speak within his brain.

"—invoked the rule of silence. After that, Genjaro Lo declared that space travel was inevitable and might solve the natural problems of our civilization—"

It had spoken in the Ancient Tongue. And, at the same time, Garth had seen a picture of a huge, four-armed being with a bulging, yet oddly symmetrical head, standing on a rostrum addressing a multitude—

"Ed!" The voice rang through the silent cavern. "Ed Garth! You made it!"

Garth whirled. A man had emerged from a cavern-mouth nearby, a short, slight man with white hair and a lined, tired face. He ran forward, his ragged garments flapping, his eyes shining.

Garth said, in a voice like a prayer, "Doc Willard. *You're alive!*"

VIII

WILLARD gripped his friend's hands. "Alive, yes. If you can call it that. I've been living for only one thing. I knew you'd come back, with help, if you got through. And you did!"

The cavern was spinning around Garth. He braced himself, staring at the man.

"Doc! I've been going crazy for five years. I thought I—I'd killed you."

Willard stared. "Killed me? But—"

"That altar!" The words tumbled out of Garth's mouth. "I couldn't remember much. That damned Noctoli poison—I lost my memory. But I knew I'd tried to knife you while you were stretched out on an altar—"

Sympathy showed in Willard's eyes. "Good Lord, Ed! And you could remember only that? You must have gone through hell."

"I did. I didn't know what—"

"But we planned it. The whole thing. A fake ceremony, to impress the Zarno and give us a chance to escape. They

thought we *might* be messengers from their gods—the Ancients—and we told 'em so, after we'd learned their language. The sacrifice—it was a fake, that's all. And it went through as we planned. You pretended to stab me, and while the Zarno were bowing and genuflecting, we got away. At least you did. They recaptured me."

Garth shook his head. "Tell me. I don't know, really."

Willard glanced at the Earthmen, curiosity in his eyes. "You've a bit of explaining to do yourself, Ed. Are they—Noctoli?"

"Yeah. I worked out an antitoxin, but it was stale." Quickly Garth explained what had happened.

"I see. Well—got a cigaret?" Willard sucked the smoke luxuriously into his lungs. "That's good. Five years since I had one of these. Sit down and let's talk. No chairs, but try the floor."

"Okay. What happened to you?"

"Nothing much. When we staged our fake ceremony—the Zarno are plenty religious—I headed for that little black temple in the forest. Know the place?"

"Yeah. That's where they caught us."

"Well, it leads to freedom. There's an underground tunnel that takes you out in a camouflaged hangar. The Ancients had antigravity. I found out later, and their flying-boats were hidden there. They're still good, Ed. They still work. I'd have got away if the Zarno hadn't been right on my heels."

"So?"

Willard nodded. "The controls are easy. A couple of push-buttons and a steering-lever. I'd got a few feet off the ground when a couple of Zarno jumped into the boat with me. They heaved me out and followed. The flying-boat went off to Mars or somewhere, I suppose—it kept on going straight up. But there are others. Only I've never been able to get at them. If I could have, I'd have headed for Oretown, pronto."

Garth's eyes were glowing. "If we could reach that hangar, Doc, we could escape—all of us."

"Sure. Only we can't. Too many guards. It's impossible to get out of this city. I've tried often enough. The only way I managed to survive was by entering

the Darkness." His voice trailed away.

"That black wall?"

"It's a vibration-barrier. None of the Zarno can pass it. It shakes them to pieces—destroys them. The Ancients made it, I suppose, to guard their library." Willard extended his hand in a sweeping gesture. "This is it. All the knowledge of the Ancients—tremendous knowledge—compiled here for reference. If we could only get it out to the world!"

Garth remembered something. "Does it mention their power-source?"

"Sure. I've had nothing to do for five years but study the library. I could put my finger on the wire-tape recording that explains the process. It's an intricate business, but we could duplicate it on Earth easily enough."

Paula would be glad to know that, Garth thought. The secret of the Ancients' power, that could replace oil and coal—a vital secret to Earth now.

WILLARD was still talking. "I ran when I heard you coming. I'd been studying one of the recordings, but I thought the Zarno might have got through the barrier somehow. . . . It doesn't harm humans, luckily, or the robots. I learned a lot in five years."

"How did you manage to keep alive?"

"I found food. The Ancients had stocked up this place. *Pills!*" Willard grimaced. "They kept me alive, and there was a machine for making water out of the air. But I'm hungry for a steak."

Garth scowled. "Doc—one more thing. You know what I mean?"

Willard sobered. "I get it, Ed. The cure. Whether or not I—"

"Whether or not you've found the cure for the Silver Plague. It hasn't been checked yet. It's still killing thousands on Earth."

"So. I wondered a lot about that. Well—the answer is yes, Ed. I know the answer."

"The cure?"

"Yes. I worked it out, completely, with the aid of the Ancients' library. They were studying it too, but they didn't have quite the right angle. However, they were able to supply the missing data I needed." Willard took from his pocket a small note-

book. "I had five years to work on it. So far, of course, it's theoretical, but everything checks. It's the cure, all right."

Somehow Garth didn't feel much excitement. Five years ago, he thought, that notebook would have saved Moira's life. Now—well, it would still save life. It would save Earth. But—

He shrugged. "Two good reasons to get back to civilization. The cure, and the secret of the power-source."

Willard nodded. "The Ancients died of the Silver Plague, indirectly. They tried to escape by changing their bodies. The library told me that."

"Their bodies? How?"

"Well—you've seen the robots in Chahn and here. Originally they were the servants of the Ancients."

"Intelligent?"

"No—not in the way you mean. They could be conditioned to perform certain tasks, but usually they were controlled telepathically by the Ancients, who wore specialized helmet-transmitters for the purpose. The robots had radioatomic brains that reacted to telepathic commands. Then when the Silver Plague struck, the Ancients tried to escape by transplanting, not their physical brains, but their *minds*. I don't quite know how it was done. But the thought-patterns, the individual mental matrix, of each Ancient was somehow impressed on the radioatomic brain of a robot. Their minds were put into the robots' brains—and controlled the metal bodies. So they escaped the Plague. But they died anyway. Human, intelligent minds can't be transplanted successfully into artificial bodies that way. So—in a hundred years—they were dead, all of them."

So that was the secret of the Ancients' disappearance from Ganymede. They had taken new bodies—and those bodies had killed them through their sheer alienage.

Willard crushed out his cigaret-stub. "All the knowledge of the Ancients at my finger-tips, Ed. You can imagine what research I've done!"

"I should have thought you'd have looked for a weapon against the Zarno," Garth said practically. "The Ancients were able to conquer them."

"I did—first of all, after I'd learned how to work the recording-machines. A

certain ray will destroy them—a vibratory beam that shakes them to pieces, disrupts their molecular structure. The only trouble is—" Willard grinned sardonically. "It takes a damn good machine shop to build such a projector."

"Oh. We couldn't—"

"We couldn't. The Ancients left plenty of apparatus here, but not the right kind. Mostly records, and a lot of robots. Sorry, Ed, but unless you brought good weapons with you, you're stuck here with me."

GARTH looked around to where his companions were standing motionless. "Yeah. Looks like it. Unless we can break through to that hangar of anti-gravity ships—"

"We can't. The city's full of the Zarno, day and night. And there are always guards outside."

Garth sighed. "The trouble is, unless we get out, nothing can stop the Silver Plague. Not to mention the fuel shortage. Wait a minute. You said the Zarno were superstitious—we tricked them once with a fake ceremony. Couldn't we try that again?"

"I did," Willard told them. "It didn't work. The Zarno know what human beings are like now. Only the gods would impress them—those robots who once were their masters."

Garth stopped breathing for a moment.

"There's a way," he said.

Willard looked at him. "I don't think so. When I saw you'd come back, I hoped for a minute—but it's no use. The Zarno are invulnerable to any weapons we can create here. We can't get out of the city."

"You said the gods would impress them."

"The gods are dead—the Ancients."

"Suppose one of them came back?"

Willard caught his breath. "What do you mean?"

"Originally the robots were controlled telepathically. Why can't that work now—for us?"

"Don't you imagine I thought of that? But it's no use, without one of them helmet-transmitters. And there aren't any. . . ." Willard sucked in his breath. "Hold on! I'd forgotten something. There's one transmitter left—just one. But it's not a portable."

"Swell!"

"Wait a minute. Come over here." The older man led the way to a tripod-projector, found a cylindrical black object, and slipped it into place. "Look at this."

Peering through the eye-pieces, Garth recognized the great cavern with the dais at one end. The scene shifted, showing the gigantic twelve-foot robot sitting on its throne, a solid block of black metal.

"Watch," Willard said.

A voice spoke in Garth's mind, in the Ancient Tongue. "It was necessary to impress the superstitious Zarno. Thus we created this robot god and placed it on its throne. Its radiatomic brain can be controlled telepathically by means of a transmitter concealed within the throne."

The scene changed, showing the back of the ebony block. A hand, inhuman, six-fingered, came into view—the hand of an Ancient. It touched a concealed spring, and the throne's back slid open, revealing a compartment easily large enough to hold a man.

"Here is the transmitter. It is placed on the head and the will focused on issuing telepathic commands to the robot god on the throne."

There was more, but now Garth watched with only half his mind. He scarcely saw the details of the ritual ceremony with which the Ancients had impressed the Zarno. When the vision vanished, he swung about, a new light in his eyes.

"That's it, Doc! That robot god's going to come to life!"

WILLARD FROWNED. "Um-m.

The gadget isn't difficult to operate—I've learned that much from the recordings. You just think hard, that's all. But—"

"The god will come to life and summon the Zarno—all of them. The rest of you can escape while I'm keeping 'em busy."

"Hold on!" the doctor snapped. "Why you? It's my job, if it's anybody's."

"Sorry," Garth said. "It doesn't work out that way. You're the only guy who can cure the Silver Plague. Unless you get out safely, it's the end of Earth."

Willard didn't answer. Garth went on swiftly.

"You could reach the hangar if it weren't for the Zarno. Well, I'll get inside that throne and start the ruckus. That'll give

you time." His voice was emotionless.

"How do you know you could reach that temple-cave? The city's full of Zarno."

Garth shrugged. "It's a chance we've got to take. The only one."

Willard chewed his lip. "Why the devil do you have to be the one?"

"Because I know the Ancient Tongue. The robot can talk, can't it? Well! It's between you and me, Doc, and you're the boy who can cure the Silver Plague. You can't get away from that."

"I—I suppose so. But—"

"You know the way out. Give me time to reach the temple and begin the ceremony. Then lead the others out. They'll obey you; they're in the Noctoli trance. Get 'em to the hangar and light out for Oretown. Be sure to take the recording of the power-source with you."

"You crazy fool," Willard said through stiff lips. "What about Moira?"

Garth's face went gray. "Moira died years ago," he said carefully. "It was the Silver Plague."

Doc didn't reply. But he nodded as though he had unexpectedly learned the answer to a problem that had been puzzling him.

"Okay," Garth said. "You know what to do. Give me time enough to make it. Then get out of here with the others, fast."

Willard's hand gripped Garth's. "Ed—" "Forget it."

He moved toward the tunnel-mouth. Paula, he saw, was lying near by, her red-gold hair cascading about her pale, lovely face.

Garth stood looking down at her for a long moment. Then he went on, into the tunnel that waited for him. He did not look back.

Cautiously he stepped through the black curtain, ready to retreat at sight of any Zarno. But the cavern was empty.

If he could make it—!

Noiselessly he stole up the passage. Once he froze against the wall at the sound of distant footsteps. But they faded and were gone.

He came out at last into a corridor he recognized. Far away, he saw the flashing gleam of the Zarno's silicate skins. They were approaching, but apparently had not seen him yet.

He raced for the archway that led into

the temple-cavern. If there were any Zarno there, it would be fatal. But luck favored him. The immense room was empty. At the far end the huge robot sat on its jet throne.

Garth sprinted across the floor. He could hear voices growing louder in the distance, and the thumping of the Zarnos' footsteps, but he dared not risk a glance behind. Could he make it?

He jerked to a halt, springing behind the throne, its bulk temporarily hiding him. The Zarno were in the temple-cave now; he could tell that by their voices. Hastily he sought the secret spring.

A panel opened in the ebon block. It was exactly as he had seen it on the tripod-recording machine, a fair-sized cubicle with light coming faintly through a vision-slit in one wall. Garth wedged himself in and slid the panel shut behind him, gasping with relief. Peering through the slit, he found he could see the entire cavern. Three Zarno were approaching.

The robot, seated on the throne above him, was, of course, invisible. Garth stared around, trying to remember the details of the Ancients' recording. A helmet transmitter . . . there it was, attached by wires to the low ceiling. Warily Garth slipped it upon his head.

What now?

A flat black plate, like a diaphragm, was set in the wall slightly above his head as he crouched. This hiding-place, he realized, had been built for the larger bodies of the Ancients.

Closing his eyes, he tried to concentrate. Doc Willard had said the helmet-transmitters worked that way. Telepathy—will-power—

"Stand up!" he commanded silently to the unseen robot above him. "Stand up!"

There was a stir of movement. Garth, peering through the slit, saw the three Zarno jerk to a halt.

One of them cried, "The gods return! *Kra-enlarnov! The gods!*"

GARTH put his mouth close to the diaphragm. His words, amplified, rolled out through the cavern in the Ancient Tongue.

"Yes—the gods return! Summon the Zarno! Let none fail to obey the summons!"

Shouts went up. The Zarno whirled and raced away. For the moment, Garth was alone.

He concentrated on the transmitter again, commanding the robot to move forward to the edge of the dais, till he could see its back.

"Raise your arm. Step back. Forward again. Back."

It worked. The robot obeyed his mental commands, awkwardly, but—it obeyed. "Back. Sit on the throne."

A jarring crash deafened Garth momentarily. He had forgotten how huge the robot was. No doubt the creature should lever itself down gradually into its seat, instead of dropping a ton of metal solidly on the black block.

Footsteps again. The Zarno were beginning to pour into the cavern. Huge as it was, they almost filled it. They flung themselves flat, crawling toward the dais, nodding their misshapen heads in awkward rhythm. Their voices were raised in a deep-throated chant.

Garth concentrated. At his mental command, the robot rose and paced slowly forward.

"*Kra-enlar!*"

Garth put his mouth to the diaphragm. His voice crashed out.

"The gods have returned! Hear me, O Zarno!"

"*We hear!*"

"Let no Zarno fail to come to the temple of the gods. Have the guards left their posts?"

"*Nay—nay!*"

"Summon them," Garth roared. "When the gods speak, all must hearken. Let every Zarno come to me now, or die!"

Some of the creatures raced away and returned with others. The chant continued.

"Have any Zarno failed to heed my summons?"

"*None—none! We are here—all!*"

Garth nearly shouted with relief. There were almost two thousand Zarno in the cavern, he judged, all genuflecting before the dais. And that meant that the city was unguarded—that Doc Willard could lead the others to the anti-gravity hangar.

If he could hold the Zarno here!

Garth shook his head, feeling oddly dizzy. He tried to concentrate. At his mental order, the giant robot lifted its

arms in symbolic, ritualistic gestures he remembered from the tripod-recorder.

But the dizziness persisted. Garth realized that his lungs were hurting. He found it difficult to draw a deep breath.

Air—he needed fresh air! The inhuman lungs of the Ancients probably were able to endure lack of oxygen far better than the human organism. In any case—Garth realized that the air was getting stale.

He investigated the vision-slit. It was barred by a glassy, transparent pane that seemed as hard as steel. Well, it would be necessary to open the panel behind him—a few inches, anyway. Garth's hand sought for the spring. It was in plain sight; there was no need to conceal it within the throne's compartment.

He pressed it. There was a low grinding that stopped almost immediately. Garth tried again.

Useless. The mechanism, somehow, was jammed. Probably its mechanism had failed when the huge robot had crashed down on the throne.

That meant—

Garth's fingers tried to find some purchase on the smooth surface of the panel. He failed . . .

A Zarno called a question. Garth turned back to the eye-slit, trying to fight back his dizziness. Heads were lifted, he saw, watching him inquiringly, as though the silicate creatures expected something. Well—

He made the robot move again, its arms reaching out in ancient ceremonial gestures. A gasp of awe came from the Zarno.

Their chant thundered out, deeper, sonorous and inhuman.

GARTH felt the beginning of a throbbing ache in his temples. He was trapped here. How long could he stand it? He was human, not one of the Ancients. He needed air—

He held the Zarno, but not for long. Once more bulbous heads were lifted, oval eyes watching him inquiringly. They were expecting something—what? Garth tried to remember what he had seen in the recorder.

More heads were lifted.

Garth made the robot step forward, raising its metal arms. He had to say

something—anything that would hold the Zarno quiet for a while, long enough for Doc and the others to escape. Words he had forgotten since childhood came suddenly, unexpectedly to him. The English phrases meant nothing to the Zarno, but the sonorous, powerful chant kept them silent.

"He shall deliver thee from the snare of the hunter; and from the noisome pestilence. . . . Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night; nor for the arrow that flieth by day . . . A thousand shall fall beside thee, and ten thousand at thy right hand; but it shall not come nigh thee . . ."

The agony flamed up again in Garth's brain, consuming, terrible. The huge robot body of the dais swayed, caught itself, and the chant thundered out again through the great cavern.

"If I take the wings of the morning; and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea; even there also shall thy hand lead me . . ."

The distant, harsh clangor of a bell sounded. Garth had heard it before, when he had crossed the threshold of the black temple in the forest. At the sound the Zarno stirred, and a few of them sprang up.

Garth thrust out his hand, fighting back the pain that tore at him like white flame.

His voice held them—

"The floods are risen, O Lord, the floods have lifted up their voices; the floods lift up their waves . . . The waves of the sea are mighty, and rage horribly; but yet the Lord, who dwelleth on high, is mightier—"

He held them. He held them, speaking a tongue they did not know, while his mind shook under the impact of sanity-destroying pain. A slow, sick bitterness crept into his soul. Was this the end—death here, prisoned on an alien world, so far from his home planet?

Death—and for what?

He closed his mind to the thought. Mentally he paced Doc and the others through the tunnel, from the black temple to the hangar. Surely they must have reached it by now! Paula—

That first glimpse he had had of the girl, in Tolomo's drinking-hell—Moir, he had thought then, for an incredible instant.

Yes, she had been like Moira. If the paths of destiny had led elsewhere than to the Black Forest of Ganymede, the result might have been far distant. He would not be dying here alone, horribly alone.

Moira—Paula—

They were the same, somehow. And Garth knew he had to keep going, till he had saved Paula Trent. A little time—a few moments more, to keep the Zarno in check.

He and Moira had been cheated of their lives, their futures in some way he could not quite understand. But there remained Paula. She must not die. She and the others must get through.

"Ed."

Garth's heart answered that soundless call. His lips formed the name *Moira*.

SHE was there, beside him, and he did not question, did not even wonder. It was enough that she had come back. Her brown ringlets curled about the pale face as he remembered, and the blue eyes held love and—something more.

A message.

"What is it, Moira? What—" He reached out hungry arms.

"Ed. It isn't only us. It's Earth. Don't stop now, Ed. A few more minutes to hold the Zarno back; that will be enough. Be strong. A little time more—such a little time, and then you can rest."

A phantom born of his delirium, Garth knew, but she was no less real for that. He tried to speak and failed. His chest constricted with pain. Outside the altar, the Zarno were stirring uneasily.

"I—I can't—"

"You must."

Anger swept through him. "Why? We've been cheated of everything, Moira! Our heritage—"

She smiled at him, very tenderly. "The grass is still green on the hills of Earth, my lover. Have you forgotten? The little streams that go laughing down the valleys, and the ocean surging up to the white beaches? There are still sunsets on Earth, and men and women will see them for ages to come. Men who might have been our sons; women who might have been our daughters. And they are our children, Ed, as surely as though we had given them birth. For we are giving them

life. There will be a future for mankind because of us. We have given up our own lives that our children may live, and go on to glories we can never know ourselves. It is Earth that needs your help now—and that is something greater than either of us."

Something greater . . .

The Zarno were beginning to move forward, and some of them were sidling toward the passage. Garth, gasping for breath, summoned all his reserve energy. He seemed to feel Moira's cool hand on his shoulder, silently urging him on.

Something greater—

"The days of man are but as grass," he croaked, and the amplified sound went thundering through the temple, halting the Zarno where they stood. They turned again to the altar.

"For he flourisheth as a flower of the field . . . for as soon as the wind goeth over, it is gone—"

He held them, somehow, knowing that Moira stood beside him. Toward the end, Garth was no longer conscious of his surroundings. The Zarno swam before his eyes, changing, altering, and abruptly they vanished. In their place was—was—

He saw Earth, as he remembered it, the loveliest planet of all. He saw the heart-breaking beauty of flaming sunsets over the emerald seas, and the snowy purity of high peaks lifting above baking deserts. He felt the cold blast of Earthwinds on his cheeks, the stinging, exciting chill of mountain streams against his skin. There was the warm smell of hay, golden in the fields; the sharpness of eucalyptus and pine; the breath of the little bright flowers that grow only on Earth.

He heard the voices of Earth. The chuckling of brooks, and the deep shouting of the gale; the lowing of cattle, the sound of leaves rustling, and the crash of angry breakers. The soul of Earth spoke to the man who would never see it again.

He listened, while he chanted the majestic, rolling syllables that kept the Zarno in check. Beside him was Moira. Beneath him, his own world, green and beautiful.

And across the emerald planet men and women came marching, sunlight making a golden path for them as they moved out of darkness into the unknown brightness

of the future. They were like gods, great-limbed, lovely, and with eyes fearless as a falcon's filled with laughter.

Before their marching feet the road of the ages unrolled. Mighty cities reared to the blue skies of Earth, and ships swept out beyond the stars, binding the galaxies and the universe with unbreakable chains of life. Outward and ever outward the circles of humanity and civilization rippled.

Men and women like gods, unafraid, knowing a life greater than ever before—And they turned questioning eyes on Garth, asking him the question on which their existence depended.

"Will you save us? Will you give us life? Will you give us the future you yourself can never know?"

Garth answered them in his own way, with Moira beside him. For now it did not matter that he was dying; he had found something greater than he had ever known before.

Through the temple his voice rang like brazen trumpets.

"—the wind bloweth . . . and the place thereof shall know it no more . . ."

A PANEL in the wall by his head lit up, making a square of brightness. He strained his eyes at it, discerning a picture. A scanner of some sort. It showed a transparent ovoid slanting up through the black trees of the forest, a ship with Doc Willard at the controls and eleven men and a girl in the vessel with him—a girl

with red-gold hair, going back to Earth, with the knowledge that would save a world from destruction.

He had not failed.

The picture on the scanner darkened. The burning ache in Garth's lungs grew worse. If he could breathe—

On the dais, the robot swayed, its metal legs giving beneath its weight. The crash of its fall brought the Zarno to their feet, frozen with amazement for a moment. Then they moved forward like a wave.

Garth saw them, dimly, through the vision-slit. A white curtain of pain blotted them out. He was dying; he knew that. The shouts of the Zarno came to him faintly.

"the wind bloweth . . . and the place thereof shall know it no more . . ."

But in that place the seeds of the future would grow. Once more Garth saw the children of Earth's unborn generations, and this time the question in their eyes was answered. They would live and go on, to the stars, and beyond.

Moira was beside him. Her cool hand touched his; she came into his arms.

And the white curtain flamed agonizingly for the last time.

Then, mercifully, there was no more pain. Under the black throne Garth's body lay motionless in its strange tomb.

The Zarnos' cries filled the temple as they mourned their dead god—but the man who had saved Earth did not hear them.



Conspiracy on Callisto

By JAMES MacCREIGH

Revolt was flaring on Callisto, and Peter Duane held the secret that would make the uprising a success or failure. Yet he could make no move, could favor no side—his memory was gone—he didn't know for whom he fought.

DUANE'S hand flicked to his waist and hung there, poised. His dis-gun remained undrawn.

The tall, white-haired man—Stevens—smiled.

"You're right, Duane," he said. "I could blast you, too. Nobody would win that way, so let's leave the guns where they are."

The muscles twitched in Peter Duane's cheeks, but his voice, when it came, was controlled. "Don't think we're going to let this go," he said. "We'll take it up with Andrias tonight. We'll see whether you can cut me out!"

The white-haired man's smile faded. He stepped forward, one hand bracing him against the thrust of the rocket engines underneath, holding to the guide rail at the side of the ship's corridor.

He said, "Duane, Andrias is your boss, not mine. I'm a free lance; I work for myself. When we land on Callisto tonight I'll be with you when you turn our—shall I say, our *cargo*?—over to him. And I'll collect my fair share of the proceeds. That's as far as it goes. I take no orders from him."

A heavy-set man in blue appeared at the end of the connecting corridor. He was moving fast, but stopped short when he saw the two men.

"Hey!" he said. "Change of course—get to your cabins." He seemed about to walk up to them, then reconsidered and hurried off. Neither man paid any attention.

Duane said, "Do I have to kill you?" It was only a question as he asked it, without threatening.

A muted alarm bell sounded through the P.A. speakers, signaling a one-minute warning. The white-haired man cocked his eyebrow.

"Not at all," he said. He took the mea-

sure of his slim, red-headed opponent. Taller, heavier, older, he was still no more uncompromisingly belligerent than Duane, standing there. "Not at all," he repeated. "Just take your ten thousand and let it go at that. Don't make trouble. Leave Andrias out of our private argument."

"Damn you!" Duane flared. "I was promised fifty thousand. I need that money. Do you think—"

"Forget what I think," Stevens said, his voice clipped and angry. "I don't care about fairness, Duane, except to myself. I've done all the work on this—I've supplied the goods. My price is set, a hundred thousand Earth dollars. What Andreas promised you is no concern of mine. The fact is that, after I've taken my share, there's only ten thousand left. That's all you get!"

Duane stared at him a long second, then nodded abruptly. "I was right the first time," he said. "I'll *have* to kill you!"

ALREADY his hand was streaking toward the grip of his dis-gun, touching it, drawing it forth. But the white-haired man was faster. His arms swept up and pinioned Duane, holding him impotent.

"Don't be a fool," he grated. "Duane—"

The P.A. speaker rattled, blared something unintelligible. Neither man heard it. Duane lunged forward into the taller man's grip, sliding down to the floor. The white-haired man grappled furiously to keep his hold on Peter's gun arm, but Peter was slipping away. Belatedly, Stevens went for his own gun.

He was too late. Duane's was out and leveled at him.

"*Now* will you listen to reason?" Duane panted. But he halted, and the muzzle of his weapon wavered. The floor swooped and surged beneath him as the



The Cameroon blasted from its cradle, racing Andrias' ships for open space.

thrust of the mighty jets was cut off. Suddenly there was no gravity. The two men, locked together, floated weightlessly out to the center of the corridor.

"Course change!" gasped white-haired Stevens. "Good God!"

The ship had reached the midpoint of its flight. The bells had sounded, warning every soul on it to take shelter, to strap themselves in their pressure bunks against the deadly stress of acceleration as the ship reversed itself and began to slow its headlong plunge into Callisto. But the two men had not heeded.

The small steering rockets flashed briefly. The men were thrust bruisingly against the side of the corridor as the rocket spun lazily on its axis. The side jets flared once more to halt the spin, when the one-eighty turn was completed, and the men were battered against the opposite wall, still weightless, still clinging to each other, still struggling.

Then the main-drive bellowed into life again, and the ship began to battle against its own built-up acceleration. The corridor floor rose up with blinking speed to smite them—

And the lights went out in a burst of crashing pain for Peter Duane.

SOMEONE was talking to him. Duane tried to force an eye open to see who it was, and failed. Something damp and clinging was all about his face, obscuring his vision. But the voice filtered in.

"Open your mouth," it said. "Please, Peter, open your mouth. You're all right. Just swallow this."

It was a girl's voice. Duane was suddenly conscious that a girl's light hand was on his shoulder. He shook his head feebly.

The voice became more insistent. "Swallow this," it said. "It's only a stimulant, to help you throw off the shock of your—accident. You're all right, otherwise."

Obediently he opened his mouth, and choked on a warm, tingly liquid. He managed to swallow it, and lay quiet as deft feminine hands did something to his face. Suddenly light filtered through his closed eyelids, and cool air stirred against his damp face.

He opened his eyes. A slight red-headed

girl in white nurse's uniform was standing there. She stepped back a pace, a web of wet gauze bandage in her hands, looking at him.

"Hello," he whispered. "You—where am I?"

"In the sick bay," she said. "You got caught out when the ship changed course. Lucky you weren't hurt, Peter. The man you were with—the old, white-haired one, Stevens—wasn't so lucky. He was underneath when the jets went on. Three ribs broken—his lung was punctured. He died in the other room an hour ago."

Duane screwed his eyes tight together and grimaced. When he opened them again there was alertness and clarity in them—but there was also bafflement.

"Girl," he said, "who are you? Where am I?"

"Peter!" There was shock and hurt in the tone of her voice. "I'm—don't you know me, Peter?"

Duane shook his head confusedly. "I don't know anything," he said. "I—I don't even know my own name."

"Duane, Duane," a man's heavy voice said. "That won't wash. Don't play dumb on me."

"Duane?" he said. "Duane. . . ." He swiveled his head and saw a dark, squat man frowning at him. "Who are you?" Peter asked.

The dark man laughed. "Take your time, Duane," he said easily. "You'll remember me. My name's Andrias. I've been waiting here for you to wake up. We have some business matters to discuss."

The nurse, still eyeing Duane with an odd bewilderment, said: "I'll leave you alone for a moment. Don't talk too much to him, Mr. Andrias. He's still suffering from shock."

"I won't," Andrias promised, grinning. Then, as the girl left the room, the smile dropped from his face.

"You play rough, Duane," he observed. "I thought you'd have trouble with Stevens. I didn't think you'd find it necessary to put him out of the way so permanently. Well, no matter. If you had to kill him, it's no skin off my nose. Give me a release on the merchandise. I've got your money here."

DUANE waved a hand and pushed himself dizzily erect, swinging his legs over the side of the high cot. A sheet had been thrown over him, but he was fully dressed. He examined his clothing with interest—gray tunic, gray leather spaceman's boots. It was unfamiliar.

He shook his head in further confusion, and the motion burst within his skull, throbbing hotly. He closed his eyes until it subsided, trying to force his brain to operate, to explain to him where and what he was.

He looked at the man named Andrias.

"Nobody seems to believe me," he said, "but I really don't know what's going on. Things are moving too fast for me. Really, I—why, I don't even know my own name! My head—it hurts. I can't think clearly."

Andrias straightened, turned a darkly-suspicious look on Duane. "Don't play tricks on me," he said savagely. "I haven't time for them. I won't mince words with you. Give me a release on the cargo now, before I have to get rough. This is a lot more important to me than your life is."

"Go to hell," Duane said shortly. "I'm playing no tricks."

There was an instant's doubt in Andrias' eyes, then it flashed away. He bent closer, peered at Duane. "I almost think—" he began.

Then he shook his head. "No," he said. "You're lying all right. You killed Stevens to get his share—and now you're trying to hold me up. That's your last chance that just went by, Duane. From now on, I'm running this show!"

He spun around and strode to the door, thrust it open. "Dakin!" he bellowed. "Reed!"

Two large, ugly men in field-gray uniforms, emblazoned with the shooting-star insignia of Callisto's League police, came in, looking to Andrias for instructions.

"Duane here is resisting arrest," Andrias said. "Take him along. We'll fix up the charges later."

"You can't do that," Duane said wearily. "I'm sick. If you've got something against me, save it. Wait till my head clears. I'm sure I can explain—"

"Explain, hell." The dark man laughed. "If I wait, this ship will be blasting off

for Ganymede within two hours. I'll wait—but so will the ship. It's not going anywhere till I give it clearance. I run Callisto; I'll give the orders here!"

II

WHOEVER this man Andrias was, thought Duane, he was certainly a man of importance on Callisto. As he had said, *he* gave the orders.

The crew of the rocket made no objection when Andrias and his men took Duane off without a word. Duane had thought the nurse, who seemed a good enough sort, might have said something on his behalf. But she was out of sight as they left. A curt sentence to a gray-clad official on the blast field where the rocket lay, and the man nodded and hurried off, to tell the rocket's captain that the ship was being refused clearance indefinitely.

A long, powerful ground car slid up before them. Andrias got in front, while the two uniformed men shoved Duane into the back of the car, climbed in beside him. Andrias gave a curt order, and the car shot forward.

The driver, sitting beside Andrias, leaned forward and reached a hand under the dashboard. The high wail of a siren came instantly from the car's roof, and what traffic was on the broad, straight highway into which they had turned pulled aside to let them race through.

Ahead lay the tall spires of a city. Graceful, hundreds of feet high, they seemed dreamlike yet somehow oddly familiar to Duane. Somewhere he had seen them before. He dragged deep into his mind, plumbing the cloudy, impenetrable haze that had settled on it, trying to bring forth the memories that he should have had. Amnesia, they called it; complete forgetting of the happenings of a lifetime. He'd heard of it—but never dreamed it could happen to him!

My name, it seems, is Peter Duane, he thought. *And they tell me that I killed a man!*

The thought was starkly incredible to him. A white-haired man, it had been; someone named Stevens. He tried to remember.

Yes, there had been a white-haired man. And there had been an argument. Some-

thing to do with money, with a shipment of goods that Stevens had supplied to Duane. There has even been talk of killing. . . .

But—murder! Duane looked at his hands helplessly.

Andrias, up ahead, was turning around. He looked sharply at Duane, for a long second. An uncertainty clouded his eyes, and abruptly he looked forward again without speaking.

"Who's this man Andrias?" Duane whispered to the nearest guard.

The man stared at him. "Governor Andrias," he said, "is the League's deputy on Callisto. You know—the Earth-Mars League. They put Governor Andrias here to—well, to govern for them."

"League?" Duane asked, wrinkling his brow. He had heard something about a League once, yes. But it was all so nebulous. . . .

The other guard stirred, leaned over. "Shut up," he said heavily. "You'll have plenty of chance for talking later."

BUT the chance was a long time in coming. Duane found himself, an hour later, still in the barred room into which he'd been thrust. The guards had brought him there, at Andrias' order, and left him. That had been all.

This was not a regular jail, Duane realized. It was more like a palace, something out of Earth's Roman-empire days, all white stone and frescoed walls. Duane wished for human companionship—particularly that of the nurse. Of all the people he'd met since awakening in that hospital bed, only she seemed warm and human. The others were—brutal, dead. It was too bad, Duane reflected, that he'd failed to remember her. She'd seemed hurt, and she had certainly known him by first name. But perhaps she would understand.

Duane sat down on a lumpy, sagging bed and buried his head in his hands. Dim ghosts of memory were wandering in his mind. He tried to conjure them into stronger relief, or to exorcise them entirely.

Somewhere, some time, a man had said to him, "*Andrias is secretly arming the Callistan cutthroats for revolt against the League. He wants personal power—he's prepared to pay any price for it. He needs guns, Earth guns smuggled in through the*

League patrol. If he can wipe out the League police garrison—those who are loyal to the League, still, instead of to Andrias—he can sit back and laugh at any fleet Earth and Mars can send. Rockets are clumsy in an atmosphere. They're helpless. And if he can arm enough of Callisto's rabble, he can't be stopped. That's why he'll pay for electron rifles with their weight in gold."

Duane could remember the scene clearly. Could almost see the sharp, aquiline face of the man who had spoken to him. But there memory stopped.

A fugitive recollection raced through his mind. He halted it, dragged it back, pinned it down; . . .

They had stopped in Darkside, the spaceport on the side of Luna that keeps perpetually averted from Earth, as if the moon knows shame and wants to hide the rough and roaring dome city that nestles in one of the great craters. Duane remembered sitting in a low-ceilinged, smoke-heavy room, across the table from a tall man with white hair. Stevens!

"*Four thousand electron rifles,*" the man had said. "*Latest government issue. Never mind how I got them; they're perfect. You know my price. Take it or leave it. And it's payable the minute we touch ground on Callisto.*"

There had been a few minutes of haggling over terms, then a handshake and a drink from a thin-necked flagon of pale-yellow liquid fire.

He and the white-haired man had gone out then, made their way by unfrequented side streets to a great windowless building. Duane remembered the white-hot stars overhead, shining piercingly through the great transparent dome that kept the air in the sealed city of Darkside, as they stood at the entrance of the warehouse and spoke in low tones to the man who answered their summons.

Then, inside. And they were looking at a huge chamber full of stacked fiber boxes—containing nothing but dehydrated dairy products and mining tools, by the stencils they bore. Duane had turned to the white-haired man with a puzzled question—and the man had laughed aloud.

He dragged one of the boxes down, ripped it open with the sharp point of a handling hook. Short-barreled, flare-

mouthed guns rolled out, tumbling over the floor. Eight of them there were in that one box, and hundreds of boxes all about. Duane picked one up, broke it, peered into the chamber where the tiny capsule of U-235 would explode with infinite violence when the trigger was pulled, spraying radiant death three thousand yards in the direction the gun was aimed. . . .

And that memory ended.

Duane got up, stared at his haggard face in the cracked mirror over the bed. *"They say I'm a killer,"* he thought. *"Apparently I'm a gun-runner as well. Good lord—what am I not?"*

His reflection—white, drawn face made all the more pallid by the red hair that blazed over it—stared back at him. There was no answer there. If only he could remember—

"All right, Duane." The deep voice of a guard came to him as the door swung open. "Stop making eyes at yourself."

Duane looked around. The guard beckoned. "Governor Andrias wants to speak to you—now. Let's not keep the governor waiting."

A LONG, narrow room, with a long carpet leading from the entrance up to a great heavy desk—that was Andrias' office. Duane felt a click in his memory as he entered. One of the ancient Earth dictators had employed just such a psychological trick to overawe those who came to beg favors of him. Muslini, or some such name.

The trick failed to work. Duane had other things on his mind; he walked the thirty-foot length of the room, designed to imbue him with a sense of his own unimportance, as steadily as he'd ever walked in the open air of his home planet.

Whichever planet that was.

The guard had remained just inside the door, at attention. Andrias waved him out. "Here I am," said Duane. "What do you want?"

Andrias said, "I've had the ship inspected and what I want is on it. That saves your life, for now. But the cargo is in your name. I could take it by force, if I had to. I prefer not to." He picked up a paper, handed it to Duane. "In spite of your behavior, you can keep alive. You can even collect the money for the guns

—Stevens' share as well as your own. This is a release form, authorizing my men to take four hundred and twenty cases of dehydrated foods and drilling supplies from the hold of the *Cameroon*—the ship you came on. Sign it, and we'll forget our argument. Only, sign it now and get it over with. I'm losing patience, Duane."

Duane said, without expression, "No."

Dark red flooded into Andrias' sallow face. His jaws bunched angrily and there was a ragged thread of incomplete control to his voice as he spoke.

"I'll have your neck for this, Duane," he said softly.

Duane looked at the man's eyes. Death was behind them, peeping out. Mentally he shrugged. What difference did it make?

"Give me the pen," he said shortly.

Andrias exhaled a deep breath. You could see the tension leave him, the mottled anger fade from his face and leave it without expression. He handed the paper to Duane without a word. He gave him a pen, watched him scrawl his name.

"That," he said, "is better." He paused a moment ruminatively. "It would have been better still if you'd not stalled me so long. I find that hard to forgive in my associates."

"The money," Peter said. If he were playing a part—pretending he knew what he was doing—he might as well play it to the hilt. "When do I get it?"

Andrias picked up the paper and looked carefully at the signature. He creased it thoughtfully, stowed it in a pocket before answering.

"Naturally," he said, "there will have to be a revision of terms. I offered a hundred and ten thousand Earth-dollars. I would have paid it—but you made me angry. You'll have to pay for that."

DUANE SAID, "I've paid already. I've been dragged from pillar to post by you. That's enough. Pay me what you owe me, if you want any more of the same goods!"

That was a shot in the dark—and it missed the mark.

Andrias' eyes widened. "You amaze me, Duane," he said. He rose and stepped around the desk, confronting Duane. "I

almost think you really have lost your memory, Duane," he said. "Otherwise, surely you would know that this all the rifles I need. With them I'll *take* whatever else I want!"

Duane said, "You're ready, then. . . ."

He took time to think it over, but he knew that no thought was required. Already the hands that he had locked behind him were clenched, taut. Already the muscles of his legs were tensing.

"You're ready," he repeated. "You've armed the Callistan exiles—the worst gutter scum on nine planets. You're set to betray the League that gave you power here. . . . Well, that changes things. I can't let you do it!"

He hurled himself at Andrias, hands sweeping around to grapple for the dark man's throat. Andrias, off-balance, staggered backward. But his own hands were diving for the twin heat guns that hung at his waist.

Duane saw his danger, and reacted. His foot twisted around Andrias' ankle; his hands at the other's throat gripped tighter. He lunged forward, slamming the hard top of his head into the other's face, feeling flesh and cartilage give as Andrias' nose mashed flat. His own head pinwheeled dizzily, agonizingly, as the jar revived the pain of his earlier accident.

But Andrias, unconscious already, tumbled back with Duane on top of him. His head made an audible, spine-chilling thud as it hit the carpeted floor.

Duane got up, retrieving the two heat guns, and stared at him.

"*They tell me I killed Stevens the same way,*" he thought. "*I'm getting in a rut!*"

But Andrias was not dead, though he was out as cold as the void beyond Pluto. The thick carpeting had saved him from a broken head.

Duane stepped over the unconscious man and looked around the room. It was furnished severely, to the point of barrenness. Two chairs before Andrias' ornate, bare-topped desk and one luxurious chair behind it; a tasseled bell cord within easy reach of Andrias' chair; the long carpet. That was all it contained.

The problem of getting out was serious, he saw. How could one—

III

METHODICALLY he ransacked the drawers of Andrias' desk. Papers, a whole arsenal of hand guns, Callistan money by the bale, ominously black-covered notebooks with cryptic figures littering their pages—those were the contents. A coldly impersonal desk, without the familiar trivia most men accumulate. There was nothing, certainly, that would get him out of a building that so closely resembled a fortress.

He tumbled the things back into the drawers helter-skelter, turned Andrias over and searched his pockets. More money—the man must have had a fortune within reach at all times—and a few meaningless papers. Duane took the release he had signed and tore it to shreds. But that was only a gesture. When Andrias came to, unless Duane had managed to get away and accomplish something, the mere lack of written permission would not keep him from the rocket's lethal cargo!

When Andrias came to. . . .

An idea bloomed in Duane's brain. He looked, then, at unconscious Andrias—and the idea withered again.

He had thought of forcing Andrias himself to front for him, at gun's point, in the conventional manner of escaping prisoners. But fist fights, fiction to the contrary notwithstanding, leave marks on the men who lose them. Andrias' throat was speckled with the livid marks of Duane's fingers; Duane's head, butting Andrias in the face, had drawn a thick stream of crimson from his nostrils, turned his sharp nose askew.

No guard of Andrias' would have been deceived for an instant, looking at that face—even assuming that Andrias could have been forced to cooperate by the threat of a gun. Which, considering the stake Andrias had in this play, was doubtful. . . .

He stood up and looked around. He had to act quickly. Already Andrias' breath was audible; he saw the man grimace and an arm flopped spasmodically on the floor. Consciousness was on its way back.

Duane touched the heat gun he'd thrust into his belt; drew it and held it poised, while he sought to discover what was in his own mind. He'd killed a man already, they said. Was he then a killer—could he

shoot Andrias now, in cold blood, with so much to gain and nothing to lose?

He stood there a moment. Then, abruptly, he reversed the weapon and chopped it down on Andrias' skull.

There was a sharp grunt from the still unconscious man, but no other sign. Only—the first tremors of movement that had shown on him halted, and did not reappear.

"No," Duane thought. "*Whatever they say, I'm not a killer!*"

But still he had to get out. How?

Once more he stared around the room, catalogued its contents. The guard would be getting impatient. Perhaps any minute he would tap the door, first timorously, then with heavier strokes.

The guard! There was a way!

DUANE eyed the length of the room. Thirty feet—it would take him a couple of seconds to run it at full speed. Was that fast enough?

There was only one way to find out.

He walked around the desk to the bell cord. He took a deep breath, tugged it savagely, and at once was in speedy motion, racing toward the door, his footsteps muffled in the deep, springy carpet. Almost as he reached it, he saw it begin to open. He quickly sidestepped and was out of the guard's sight, behind the door, as the man looked in.

Quick suspicion flared in his eyes, then certainty as he saw Andrias huddled on the floor. He opened his mouth to cry out—

But Duane's arm was around his throat, and he had no breath to spare. Duane's foot lashed out and the door slammed shut; Duane's balled left fist came up and connected with the guard's chin. Abruptly the man slumped.

Duane took a deep breath and let the man drop to the floor. But he paused only a second; now he had two unconscious men on his hands and he dared let neither revive until he was prepared.

He grasped the guard's arm and dragged him roughly the length of the room. He leaped on top of the desk, brutally scarring its gleaming top with the hard spikes of his boots. His agile fingers unfastened the long bell cord without causing it to ring and, bearing it, he dropped again to the floor.

Tugging and straining, he got the limp form of Andrias into his own chair, bound him with the bell cord, gagged him with the priceless Venus-wool scarf Andrias wore knotted about his throat. He tested his bindings with full strength, and smiled. Those would hold, let Andrias struggle as he would.

The guard he stripped of clothing, bound and gagged with his own belt and space-man's kerchief. He dragged him around behind the desk, thrust him under it out of sight. Andrias' chair he turned so that the unconscious face was averted from the door. Should anyone look in, then, the fact of Andrias' unconsciousness might not be noticed.

Then he took off his own clothes, quickly assumed the field-gray uniform of the guard. It fit like the skin of a fruit. He felt himself bulging out of it in a dozen places. The long cape the guard wore would conceal that, perhaps. In any case, there was nothing better.

Trying to make his stride as martial as possible, he walked down the long carpet to the door, opened it and stepped outside.

HIS LUCK couldn't hold out forever. It was next to miraculous that he got as far as he did—out of the anteroom before Andrias' office, past the two guards there, who eyed him absently but said nothing, down the great entrance hall, straight out the front door.

Going through the city had been easier, of course. There were many men in uniforms like his. Duane thought, then, that Andrias' power could not have been too strong, even over the League police whom he nominally commanded. The police could not all have been corrupt. There were too many of them; had they been turncoats, aiding Andrias in his revolt against the League, there would have been no need to smuggle rifles in for an unruly mass of civilians.

Duane cursed the lack of foresight of the early Earth governments. They'd made a prison planet of Callisto; had filled it with the worst scum of Earth. Then, when the damage had been done—when Callisto had become a pest-hole among the planets; its iniquities a stench that rose to the stars—they had belatedly found that they had created a problem worse than the one they'd

tried to solve. One like a hydra-beast.

Criminality was not a thing of heredity. The children of the transported convicts, most of them, were honest and wanted to be respectable. And they could not be.

Earth's crime rate, too, had not been lowered materially by exiling its gangsters and murderers to Callisto. When it was long past time, the League had stepped in, and set a governor of its own over Callisto.

If the governor had been an honest man a satisfactory solution might have been worked out. The first governor had been honest. Under him great strides had been made. The bribe-proof, gun-handly League police had stamped out the wide-open plague spots of the planet; public works had been begun on a large scale. The beginnings of representative government had been established.

But the first governor had died. And the second governor had been—Andrias.

"*You can see the results!*" Duane thought grimly as he swung into the airfield in his rented ground car. Foreboding was stamped on the faces of half the Callistans he'd seen—and dark treachery on the others. Some of those men had been among the actual exiled criminals—the last convict ship had landed only a dozen years before. All of those whom Andrias planned to arm were either of the original transportation-men, or their weaker descendants.

What was holding Andrias back? Why the need for smuggling guns in?

The answer to that, Duane thought, was encouraging but not conclusive. Clearly, then, Andrias did not have complete control over the League police. But how much control he did have, what officers he had won over to treachery, Duane could not begin to guess.

Duane slid the car into a parking slot, switched off the ignition and left it. It was night, but the short Callistan dark period was nearly over. A pearly glow at the horizon showed where the sun would come bulging over in a few minutes; while at the opposite rim of the planet he could still see the blood-red disc of mighty Jupiter lingering for a moment, casting a crimson hue over the landscape, before it made the final plunge. The field was not flood-lit. Traffic was scarce on Callisto.

Duane, almost invisible in the uncertain light, stepped boldly out across the jet-blasted tarmac toward the huge bulk of the *Cameroon*, the rocket transport which had brought him. Two other ships lay on the same seared pavement, but they were smaller. They were fighting ships, small, speedy ones, in Callisto for refueling before returning to the League's ceaseless patrol of the System's starlanes.

Duane hesitated briefly, wondering whether he ought to go to one of those ships and tell his story to its League commander. He decided against it. There was too little certainty for him there; too much risk that the commander, even, might be a tool of Andrias'.

Duane shook his head angrily. If only his memory were clear—if only he could be sure what has was doing!

HE REACHED the portal of the ship. A gray-clad League officer was there standing guard, to prevent the ship taking off.

"Official business," Duane said curtly, and swept by the startled man before he could object. He hurried along the corridor toward the captain's office and control room. A purser he passed looked at him curiously, and Duane averted his face. If the man recognized him there might be questions.

For the thousandth time he cursed the gray cloud that overhung his memory. He didn't know, even, who among the crew might know him and spread the alarm.

Then he was at the door marked, *Crew only—do not enter!* He tapped on it, then grasped the knob and swung it open.

A squat, open-featured man in blue, the bronze eagles of the Mercantile Service resting lightly on his powerful shoulders, looked at him. Recognition flared in his eyes.

"Duane!" he whispered. "Peter Duane, what're you doing in the clothes of Andrias' household guard?"

Duane felt the tenseness ebb out of his throat. Here was a friend.

"Captain," he said, "you seem to be a friend of mind. If you are—I need you. You see, I've lost my memory."

"Lost your memory?" the captain echoed. "You mean that blow on your head? The ship's surgeon said something . . . yes,

that was it. I hardly believed him, though."

"But were we friends?"

"Why, yes, Peter."

"Then help me now," said Duane. "I have a cargo stowed in your hold, Captain. Do you know what it is?"

"Why—yes. The rifles, you mean?"

Duane blinked. He nodded, then looked dizzily for a chair. The captain was a friend of his, all right—a fellow gun-runner!

"Good God," he said aloud. "What a mess!"

"What's happened?" the captain asked. "I saw you in the corridor, arguing with Stevens. You looked like trouble, and I should have come up to you then. But the course was to be changed, and I had to be there. . . . And the next I hear, Stevens is dead, and you've maybe killed him. Then I heard you've lost your memory, and are in a jam with Andrias."

He paused and speculation came into his eyes, almost hostility.

"Peter Duane," he said softly, "it strikes me that you may have lost more than your memory. Which side are you on. What happened between you and Andrias? Tell me now if you've changed sides on me, man. For friendship's sake I won't be too hard on you. But there's too much at stake here—"

"Oh, hell," said Peter, and the heat gun was suddenly in his hand, leveled at the squat man in blue. "I wish you were on my side, but there's no way I can tell. I can trust myself, I think—but that's all. Put up your hands!"

And that was when his luck ran out.

"Peter—" the captain began.

IV

BUT a sound from outside halted him. Together the two men stared at the viewplates. A siren had begun to shriek in the distance, the siren of a racing ground car. Through the gates it plunged, scattering the light wooden barrier. It spun crazily around on two wheels and came roaring for the ship.

Andrias was in it.

Peter turned on the captain, and the gun was rigidly outthrust in his hand.

"Close your ports!" he snarled. "Up rockets—in a hurry!"

"Listen, Peter," the captain began.

"I said, hurry!" The car's brakes shrieked outside, and it disappeared from the view of the men. There was an abrupt babble of voices.

"Close your ports!" Peter shouted savagely. "Now!"

The captain opened his mouth to speak, then snapped it shut. He touched the stud of a communications set, said into it, "Close ports. Snap to it. Engine room—up rockets in ten seconds. All crew—stand by for lift!"

The ship's own take-off siren howled shrilly, drowning out the angry voices from below. Peter felt the whine of the electric that dogged shut the heavy pressure doors. He stepped to the pilot's chair, slid into it, buckled the compression straps around him.

The instruments—he recognized them all, knew how to use them! Had he been a rocket pilot before his mind had blanked—before embarking on the more lucrative profession of gun smuggler? He wondered. . . .

But it was the captain who took the ship off. "Ten seconds," Peter said. "Get moving!"

The captain hesitated the barest fraction, but his eyes were on the heat gun and he knew that Duane was capable of using it. "The men—" he said. "If they're underneath when the jets go, they'll burn!"

"That's the chance they take," said Duane. "They heard the siren!"

The captain turned his head quickly, and his fingers flashed out. He was in his own acceleration seat too, laced down by heavy canvas webbing. His hands reached out to the controls before him, and his fingers took on a life of their own as they wove dexterously across the keys, setting up fire-patterns, charting a course of take-off. Then the heel of his hand settled on the firing stop. . . .

THE ACCELERATION was worse than Peter's clouded mind had expected, but no more than he could stand. In his frame of mind, he could stand almost anything, he thought—short of instant annihilation!

The thin air of Callisto howled past them, forming a high obligato to the thunder of the jets. Then the air-howl faded sharply to silence, and the booming of the rockets

became less a thing of sound than a rumble in the framework of the *Cameroon*. They were in space.

The captain's foot kicked the pedal that shut off the over-drive jets, reducing the thrust to a mere one-gravity acceleration. He turned to Duane.

"What now?" he asked.

Duane, busy unstrapping himself from the restraining belts, shook his head without answering. What now? "*A damn good question!*" he thought.

The captain, with the ease of long practice, was already out of his own pressure straps. He stood there by his chair, watching Duane closely. But the gun was still in Duane's hand, despite his preoccupation.

Duane cocked an ear as he threw off the last strap. Did he hear voices in the corridor, a distance away but coming.

The captain, looking out the port with considerable interest, interrupted his train of thought. "What," he asked, "for instance, are you going to do about—those?"

His arm was outstretched, pointing outward and down. Duane looked in that direction—

The two patrol rockets were streaking up after his commandeered ship. Fairy-like in their pastel shades, with the delicate tracery of girders over their fighting noses, they nevertheless represented grim menace to Duane!

He swore under his breath. The *Cameroon*, huge and lumbering, was helpless as a sitting bird before those lithe hawks of prey. If only he knew which side the ships were on. If only he knew—anything!

He couldn't afford to take a chance. "Stand back!" he ordered the captain. The man in blue gave ground before him, staring wonderingly as Duane advanced. Duane took a quick look at the control set-up, tried to remember how to work it.

It was so tantalizingly close to his memory! He cursed again; then stabbed down on a dozen keys at random, heeled the main control down, jumped back, even as the ship careened madly about in its flight, and blasted the delicate controls to shattered ashes with a bolt from his heat gun. Now the ship was crippled, for the time being at least. Short of a nigh-impossible boarding in space, the two patrol cruisers

could do nothing with it till the controls were repaired. The *Cameroon*, and its cargo of political dynamite, would circle through space for hours or days.

It wasn't much—but it was the best he could do. At least it would give him time to think things over.

No. He heard the voices of the men in the corridor again, tumbled about by the abrupt course change—luckily, it had been only a mild thing compared to the one that had killed Stevens and caused his own present dilemma—but regaining their feet and coming on. And one of the voices, loud and harsh, was Andrias! Somehow, before the ports closed, he'd managed to board the *Cameroon*!

DUANE stood erect, whirled to face the door. The captain stood by it. Duane thrust his heat gun at him.

"The door!" he commanded. "Lock it!"

Urged by the menace of the heat gun, the captain hurriedly put out a hand to the lock of the door—

And jerked it back, nursing smashed knuckles, as Andrias and four men burst in, hurling the door open before them. They came to a sliding, tumbling halt, though, as they faced grim Duane and his ready heat pistol.

"Hold it!" he ordered. "That's right. . . . Stay that way while I figure things out. The first man that moves, dies for it."

Dark blood flooded into Andrias' face, but he said no word, only stood there glaring hatred. The smear of crimson had been brushed from his face, but his nose was still awry and a huge purplish bruise was spreading over it and across one cheek. The three men with him were guards. All were armed—the police with hand weapons as lethal as Duane's own, Andrias with an old-style projective-type weapon—an ancient pistol, snatched from some bewildered spaceman as they burst into the *Cameroon*.

Duane braced himself with one arm against the pilot's chair and stared at them. The crazy circular course the blasted controls had given the ship had a strong lateral component; around and around the ship went, in a screaming circle, chasing its own tail. There was a sudden change in the light from the port outside; Duane involuntarily looked up for a moment. Dulled

and purplish was the gleam from the brilliant stars all about; the *Cameroon*, in its locked orbit, had completed a circle and was plunging through its own wake of expelled jet-gases. He saw the two patrol rockets streak past; then saw the flood of rocket-flares from their side jets as they spun and braked, trying to match course and speed with the crazy orbit of the *Cameroon*.

He'd looked away for only a second; abruptly he looked back.

"Easy!" he snapped. Andrias' arm, which had begun to lift, straightened out, and the scowl on the governor's face darkened even more.

Clackety-clack. There was the sound of a girl's high heels running along the corridor, followed by heavier thumps from the space boots of men. Duane jerked his gun at Andrias and his police.

"Out of the way!" he said. "Let's see who's coming now."

It was the girl. Red hair fluttering in the wake of her running, face alight with anxiety, she burst into the room.

"Peter!" she cried. "Andrias and his men—"

She stopped short and took in the tableau. Duane's eyes were on her, and he was about to speak. Then he became conscious of something in her own eyes, a sudden spark that flared even before her lips opened and a thin cry came from them; even before she leaped to one side, at Andrias.

Peter cursed and tried to turn, to dodge; tried to bring his heat gun around. But a thunder louder than the bellowing jets outside filled the room, and a streak of livid fire crossed the fringe of Peter's brain. Sudden blackness closed in around him. He fell—and his closing eyes saw new figures running into the room, saw the counterplay of lashing heat beams.

This is it—he thought grimly, and then thought no more.

IV

DUANE was in the sickbay again, on the same bed. His head was spinning agonizedly. He forced his eyes open—and the girl was there; the same girl. She was watching him. A cloud on her face lifted as she saw his lids flicker open;

then it descended again. Her lips quivered.

"Darn you, Peter," she whispered. "Who are you now?"

"Why—why, I'm Peter Duane, of course," he said.

"Well, thank God you know that!" It was the captain. He'd changed since the last time Peter had seen him. One arm was slung in bandages that bore the yellow seeping tint of burn salve.

Peter shook his head to try to clear it. "Where—where am I?" he asked. "Andrias—"

"Andrias is where he won't bother you," the captain said. "Locked up below. So are two of his men. The other one's dead. How's your memory, Peter?"

Duane touched it experimentally with a questing mental finger. It seemed all right, though he felt still dazed.

"Coming along," he said. "But where am I? The controls—I blasted them."

The captain laughed. "I know," he said briefly. "Well—I guess you had to, in a way. You didn't trust anyone; couldn't trust anyone. You had to make sure the rifles wouldn't get back to Callisto too soon. But they're working on installing duplicates now, Peter. In an hour we'll be back on Callisto. We shut the jets off already; we're in an orbit."

Duane sank back. "Listen," he said. "I think—I think my memory's clearing, somehow. But how—I mean, were you on my side? All along?"

The captain nodded soberly. "On your side, yes, Peter," he said. "The League's side, that is. You and I, you know, both work for the League. When they got word of Andrias' plans, they had to work fast. To move in by force would have meant bloodshed, would have forced his hand. That would have been utterly bad. It was too dangerous. Callisto is politically a powder-keg already. The whole thing might have exploded."

Peter's eyes flared with sudden hope and enlightenment. "And you and I—" he began.

"You and I, and a couple of other undercover workers were put on the job," the captain nodded. "We had to find out who Andrias' supporters were—and to keep him from getting more electron rifles while the commanders of the Callisto garrison were quietly checked, to see who was on which side. They've found Andrias' Earth

backers—a group of wealthy malcontents who thought Callisto should be exploited for their gain, had made secret deals with him for concessions. You, of course, slowed down the delivery of the rifles as long as you could. They lay in the Lunar warehouses a precious extra week while you haggled over terms. That's what you were doing with Stevens, I think, when the course change caught you both."

"You've had him long enough," the nurse broke in. "I have a few words to say."

"No, wait—" Duane protested. But the captain was grinning broadly. He moved toward the door.

"Later," he said over his shoulder. "There'll be plenty of time." The door closed behind him. Duane turned to the girl.

HE SHOOK his head again. The cloud was lifting. He could almost remember everything again; things were beginning to come into focus. This girl, for instance—

She noticed his motion. "How's your head, Peter?" she asked solicitously. "Andrias hit you with that awful old bullet-gun. I tried to stop him, but all I could do was jar his arm. Oh, Peter, I was so afraid when I saw you fall!"

"You probably saved my life," Peter said soberly. "Andrias struck me as a

pretty good shot." He tried to grin.

The girl frowned. "Peter," she said, "I'm sorry if I seemed rude, before—the last time you were here. It was just that I. . . . Well, you didn't remember me. I couldn't understand."

Peter stared at her. Yes—he *should* remember her. He did, only—

"Perhaps this will help you," the girl said. She rummaged in a pocket of her uniform, brought something out that was tiny and glittering. "I don't wear it on duty, Peter. But I guess this is an exception. . . ."

Peter pushed himself up on one elbow, trying to make out what she was doing. She was slipping the small thing on a finger. . . .

A ring. An engagement ring!

"Oh—" said Peter. And suddenly everything clicked; he remembered; he could recall . . . everything. That second blow on his head had undone the harm of the first one.

He swung his legs over the side of the bed, stood up, reached out hungry arms for the girl.

"Of course I remember," he said as she came into the circle of his arms. "The ring on your finger. I ought to remember—I *put it there!*"

And for a long time after there was no need for words.



A Fiction House Magazine



DESTINATION—DEATH

By WILBUR S. PEACOCK

One man had to die on Uranus' frozen crust,
so that the other might live—and Bart Caxton
had a gun.



A cone of blackness dropped Headley in his tracks.

THE yellow gauge clicked with a tiny sound, and the oxygen tank went dry. The relay ratchetted slowly, automatically coupled on the next tank, and

the needle on the gauge climbed to high-pressure again.

Bart Caxton watched the needle swing, and beads of perspiration rode high on his

cheekbones. He twisted the metal mug in his hands, and his voice was ragged with welling emotion.

"Three weeks," he said viciously. "And we're five weeks from the shipping lanes. There isn't enough oxygen to carry us back."

"Shut up!" Tom Headley's tone was thin with suppressed anger. "All the damned talking in the world won't change things. We've got to land now, have got to find the *kronalium*, or we'll never get back."

He leaned against the wall, searching the cloud-shrouded ground below the ship, feeling the uneven drumming of the rockets driving the ship forward. Nerves crawled his back, and sweat slimed his hands. He shuddered, imagining the horrors that might lie below.

The mug banged against the floor, and Caxton was standing, half-crouched, his heavy face set and stony, his hands riding the butts of his twin dis-guns.

"I say we go back," he snarled through set teeth.

Headley laughed, and the sound was the only thing that could have broken the tension of the moment. He tilted his head and laughed until the tears ran from his eyes; and slowly the rage faded from Caxton's face, and his shoulders sagged in weary futility.

"Okay, you win," Caxton said sullenly. "I know I can't force you to turn around, since you're the only one of us that can recognize and work *kronalium* for the stern jets. But," and his eyes were swirling pools of flaming hate. "When we do get back, I'm going to blow a hole through your back some night."

Tom Headley turned away, the fear piling in his mind until it was a choking cloud that stifled all thought.

"If we get back," he said dully.

HE SLID his hands over the control panel, adjusting the studs and levers with a delicate familiarity, striving to bring another ounce of power from the single rocket-bank that still functioned. But there was only the uneven beat of the rockets vibrating the floor as they had done for three days now, and no adjustment of the controls could make them function better.

Bart Caxton sat again, fumbled a cigarette from his pocket, then dropped it to the floor. His face was white beneath its tan, and there was a haunted desperation in the tightness of his bulky body.

"How long will it take?" he asked. "Will we make it back to Earth before—" His voice thickened. "—before we smother to death?"

Tom Headley shrugged. "It'll be tight," he said slowly. "We'll be on half oxygenations the full trip back. But it can be done; I went three months on half-rations once—and then got drunk on Earth's air for two days after I landed."

"To hell with you and your fancy trips!" The madness was building again in Caxton's mind. "You've been everywhere—but you ain't been *here*; you don't know what Uranus is like, nobody does."

He lunged to his feet, pressed close to the port. His breath clouded the quartzite pane, and he polished the glass impatiently.

"Look at that," he said thinly. "That's the place we were going to explore; that's the place where it is so cold and the pressure so great, air collapses and can't be breathed. We were going to do what the early explorers failed to do; try to find life and minerals. They failed because their space suits could not stand the cold. Now we'll be marooned there because a damned meteor busted our stern rockets all to hell!"

"Don't blame *me* for that," Headley said, and instantly regretted the words.

"Okay!" Caxton spun back to his seat. "I let the force-screen die for a couple of hours while I slept. But don't think I'm taking the blame for the whole mess, even at that. This was your screwy idea."

Headley nodded. "If we succeed, our reputations will be big enough to gain us backing for almost anything." He grinned, and some of the fear was gone from his mind. "Hell, what if we are cooped up here for a few days? I'll fix the rockets, we'll do a bit of exploring, and then high-tail it back for more oxygen. We'll live in vac-suits and save our air; and the suits hold enough rations to last us for three months."

"And if the rockets aren't fixed?"

Tom Headley forced the thought from his mind. "They'll be fixed," he said quietly.

Bart Caxton slumped into a sullen silence, his slitted eyes watching the profile of his companion. Slowly, cunning crept into his face, and his right hand slid along his thigh toward one belt-gun.

"I wouldn't," Headley said without moving. "You can't fix the ship, and help won't be sent for us for at least three months. A man couldn't live that long, on the oxygen we have left, I don't believe."

"I might make the oxygen last for me until I got back to a regular traffic lane."

Headley swung about, and anger paled his face. "Damn it, Caxton," he said brittly, "we'll get out of this! Probably, because of the pressure and cold on the planet, we'll find frozen air which can be thawed out; we'll look for it along with the *kronalium*." He watched the stillness of his partner's hand. "Murder won't solve anything!" he finished softly.

Bart Caxton nodded slowly. "Sorry, Headley," he said. "It's just that I've never been in a jam like this before."

Tom Headley grinned. "We'll see it through—together," he said.

"Okay!" Caxton's tone was sullenly agreeable, but small fires of cunning still swirled in his eyes.

"Get ready for a shock-landing," Headley said relievedly, reached for the controls.

THE ICY wind roared like ten million furies about the grounded ship, sucking up the powdery snow, smashing it against the gleaming alumisteel hull. Great boulders of snow and ice tumbled playfully about the rubbly landscape, splashed in foamy explosions into the semi-frozen pools of liquid that dotted the planet's surface.

Tom Headley shivered involuntarily, turned back from the port.

"Colder than the hinges of hell out there," he said worriedly. "I can understand how the first crude vac-suits couldn't stand up for very long."

"Yeah!" Caxton glanced up from sealing the zipper slit at the front of his suit. "I only hope these suits can take it."

"They can; they're made for absolute-zero work in space. Here, the only trouble lies in the super-gravity and the wind. Either might rupture the outfits."

Caxton watched snow pile against a

huge boulder, then saw it whisked instantly away by the force of the wind. He glanced at his vac-suit against the wall, and fear rode the sullenness of his eyes.

"Who's going out to do the exploring?"

Headley smiled from where he tugged on his suit. "Both of us," he said cheerfully. "We'll stay together with a shock-line; then if one of us is injured, the other can help him back to the ship."

He shrugged his shoulders into the suit, closed the air-tight zipper. Caxton turned slowly, lifted his suit, carefully fitted it to his stocky body. His fingers shook slightly, and his face was white.

Tom Headley watched his partner silently for a moment, then shrugged and checked the oxy-cylinder pressure-gauge. The needle pressed tight against its rest-pin. He lifted the glassite helmet, swung it idly in his hand for a moment. He knew the grimness of the moment, knew that the tank on his back held less than six hours of life-saving oxygen. When that was gone, if he were not back at the ship, he would die. A wry smile lifted the corners of his mobile mouth. Within the suit were enough concentrates and vitamin capsules to last him for months, and a special apparatus made it possible for water to be drawn from the air he breathed. He grinned at the thought; without air, the rest was superfluous.

"Okay," Caxton said finally, "let's take a look." He slipped on the helmet, clogged it to his shoulder-plates, left the visi-port open. Cunning still burned in his eyes, and his gaze dropped when he caught the full impact of Headley's distrust.

Headley locked on his helmet, clogged the port shut, tested his radio. Caxton answered shortly, shut his visi-ports and both turned to the entrance of the ship.

Metal squealed beneath Headley's hands; then the cogs were loose. Headley braced his shoulder against the port, strained mightily, was joined by his partner. Together, their strength was sufficient to force the door open against pressure of the air outside.

THE AIR gushed in with incredible force, shoved the men forcefully against the metal wall, then subsided as the pressure was equalized. Headley stepped forward, felt the icy crystals of

snow tapping against his suit. He thrust one arm through the port, gasped, as gravity jerked it groundward. He leaned back, sighed. Inside the ship, with its inertia-stasis gravity, normal movement was possible; but outside, with the super gravity, even slow walking would be a job.

"Set your suit control for three gravities," he ordered. "That way, we'll have enough weight to stay on the ground, and will still be able to move."

Bart Caxton growled an unintelligible reply, drew his right arm from the semi-rigid sleeve of his suit, made an adjustment on the suit's control-panel. Instantly, weight descended with pile-driving force, and muscles corded in his legs to counteract the tripled gravity.

Headley adjusted his gravity control, then connected himself to Caxton with a ten-foot length of cable. Carefully, he lowered himself from the port, stood erect in the howling wind and snow, waited until Caxton had clambered down to his side. Reaching upward, they closed the port, leaving it uncogged, so that they could easily reenter.

Headley checked his radi-compass bearings, then braced the full force of the wind, Caxton pressing forward at his side. They struggled toward the ice-sheathed cliff a hundred yards away, each step an agony of effort, clumsily dodging a huge boulder that rolled a lazy path of death toward them.

Snow smashed at them, made vision difficult, went whirling away. Even through the radi-heated layers of their suits, they could feel the implacable cold plucking at their lives with skeletal fingers of death. Minutes passed, as they fought through the drifting snow, each minute an age of effort; and when Headley glanced back, he felt a vague surprise to find that they had travelled so short a distance. He grinned at Caxton.

"Like trying to run in a slow-motion dream," he said, frowned slightly when he heard his partner's sullen growl of acknowledgment.

They struggled forward again, approaching the cliff of ice and rock that towered overhead. Headley splashed heedlessly through a small pool of semi-liquid, halted with a tiny cry of excitement.

"Look!" he said. "That rock's alive."

Bart Caxton tilted his gaze to where several clay-colored rocks lay at the edge of the pool.

"You're nuts," he said. "They're just rocks."

"I'll swear I saw one move out of the way of my foot," Headley insisted stubbornly, bent and lifted the first of the rocks.

It was heavy in his hands, and he had the uncanny sensation that it squirmed impatiently as he lifted it. He examined it carefully, ignoring Caxton's impatient words for them to hurry. And even as he watched, he saw the living rock split in his hands, opening down the side, disclosing gill-like fringed flesh that looked like slivers of whitish ice.

"It is alive!" he exclaimed excitedly, then dropped the stone as sudden giddiness clutched at his senses.

Caxton caught at his drooping body. "What's wrong?" he snapped.

Headley blinked his eyes. "Nothing!" he disclaimed. "Just a combination of pressure and lack of oxygen." He reached for his suit's panel, opened the oxygen valve another quarter turn.

He shook his head slightly, then bent to study the rock he had dropped. It had not moved, nor had its mouth-like opening closed. It lay at his feet in the shallow liquid, resembling nothing more than a ruptured rock.

"To hell with it!" Caxton said disagreeably. "Let's find the *kronalium*."

Headley nodded, stumbled after Caxton. But jubilation was in his heart. When he and Caxton returned, they would take back several of the rock-creatures as living proof of the success of their mission.

He glanced back, saw squat legs flick from the opening in the rock, saw the creature scurry back to the few others of its kind that rested at the side of the semi-frozen pool of liquid. He grinned again, then pressed forward to lead the way to the cliff.

THEY rested in the lee of the escarpment, safe from the howling wind, huddling out of the way of the rocks and snow-clots that went spinning by from the fury of the storm.

"Now what?" Caxton asked.

Tom Headley glanced at the gauges be-

low the level of his chin, watched the needles carefully.

"God!" he said. "This place is a storehouse of minerals and elements. We'll have no trouble getting money for an expedition."

"Damn it!" Rage knotted Caxton's voice until it was a thin screech. "Who cares about that; do you find any traces of *kronalium*?"

Headley watched a single dial, turned slowly, studying the line of cliff-base at his left. "Close by," he said. "It must be a big deposit, for the needle doesn't waver."

"Then let's get to it!" Caxton came to his feet, towered over his squatting partner.

Headley struggled upright, fighting the super-gravity, led the way down the edge of the escarpment. Time and again, he fell, tripped by the gravity, whirled aside by the smashing wind. Each time, he struggled erect, forced himself to go forward again.

He watched the needle floating in its case, followed its point unerringly toward a shallow recess in the cliff's base. Using his belt pick, he chopped at the layer of ice and snow, let out a shout of relief when a strip of reddish metal appeared.

"This is it," he announced. "Now the repair job will be simple."

Bart Caxton nodded, seeing the metal, and for a brief second his hand hovered over the single gun strapped to his suit. Then he relaxed, caught his pick in his right hand, bent forward to help smash away great chunks of the metal.

"It's almost anticlimactic," he said shortly, "finding this stuff so easily."

Tom Headley grinned. "It would have been more anticlimactic," he said, "not to have found it. I've found *traces* of it on every planet I've visited."

Then they worked without further conversation, digging loose a great pile of the metal, making staggering trips to the ship with the precious element that was the only metal with which their rocket tubes could be repaired. Hours later, they clogged the port shut on their ship, exhausted the tainted air, released a breathable atmosphere.

Out of their suits, they ate a quick meal, began the task of smelting the *kronalium*

so that it would fit the wrecked drive mechanism at the rear of the ship. Headley worked with the quiet sureness of a man whose life had been self-sufficient; Caxton worked with the grim doggedness of a man who knows that his life hinges upon his speed in working.

THEY worked in shifts, eating and sleeping when they could, Caxton doing the crude work, Headley putting the final touches upon the delicate task that was theirs.

And forty hours later they stood in admiration of the job they had done. New metal tubes glowed redly in the light of the radi-lamps, ready to send the ship hurtling back toward inhabited space. They still sparkled from the heat generated when Headley had given them a trial burst of power.

"And that's that," Headley said. His face was grim and lined, and his smile was a trifle forced.

Bart Caxton nodded, but his eyes were on the bank of dials that indicated the quantity of oxygen still aboard the ship. His lips were thin, and his eyes blank, as he made swift calculations in his chaotic mind.

"Let's blast off," he said.

Tom Headley grinned. "Not yet," he said. "There's five hundred pounds of *kronalium* back there that we're taking along. And I want several of those rock animals for living proof that we've been here."

Anger distorted Caxton's features. His hand sought the gun at his waist, then dropped beneath the steadiness of Headley's gaze.

"All right," he agreed sullenly. "But let's hurry."

Five trips they made, carrying the metal back to the ship, knowing that each trip made them more wealthy, so scarce was the metal in great quantities.

And then, on the sixth trip, Caxton snatched the single gun from Headley's waist. He laughed as he did so, and the sound was thin and strained with triumph.

"It's you or me, Headley," he snarled. "And I figure it's going to be me."

Headley felt horror welling into his mind, but he forced his voice to be absolutely calm and unemotional.

"Don't be a fool, man," he said. "Both of us can make it back, by going on short oxy-rations."

Caxton shook his head. "I'm going back," he said viciously. "I'm taking the ship, the *kronalium*, and a couple of those damned animals for evidence. I'll say that you died on Uranus." His voice was suddenly flat and deadly. "Sucker!"

A cone of blackness flared from the gun in his hand, caught Tom Headley, dropped him in his tracks. He twitched silently, lay where he had fallen, his right arm splashing liquid from the tiny pool at his feet.

Bart Caxton tossed the gun aside, leaned over, unscrewed the hinged valve on Headley's oxygen tank, then callously dumped the unconscious man into the pool.

Then, without another glance at the body submerged in the pool, Caxton caught up three of the living rocks, turned and fought his way back to the ship. He stood for a moment in the ship's port, staring bleakly at the pool where the dying body of his partner lay. Then he slammed the port, cogged it shut.

He laid the rock animals in a dark corner of the tank room, then walked heavily back to the control room and removed his suit. Grinning, he sank into the pilot's seat, and his hands raced over the controls.

Rockets drummed, and the ship fled into space on a tail of flaming gasses.

Bart Caxton watched the gauges, then reached out and adjusted the oxygen valve. He would have to go on three-quarters' rations, but there would still be oxygen left when he struck the spacelanes.

AND BACK on Uranus, Tom Headley stirred out of his unconsciousness. He gasped, struggled to his feet. Metal banged on his shoulder, and a reaching hand found the opened valve. He instinctively screwed it shut, dull horror and terror piling in his mind.

He knew that he had but seconds to live, and the utter futility of his predicament made the situation even more horrible. True, he had his radio—but its range was less than a hundred miles; it would bring rescue only if a rescue party landed. He

laughed a bit, grimly, ironically, remembering the great supply of food tablets that were in his suit. All that he lacked to live was air.

Then he frowned, seeing the oxygen gauge in his suit. The needle pressed tight against its stop-post. He tapped it, then checked another gauge. And sudden understanding came to his eyes—and he fought against the hysterical laughter that filled his throat.

Bart Caxton had failed in his murder attempt.

For Tom Headley's shoulder tank was full of liquid oxygen. He had fallen into a pool of oxygen, liquiesced by the tremendous pressure of Uranus, and the pressure of the atmosphere had forced the oxygen into his tank.

Now there were but the interminable weeks of waiting that were to come before a rescue expedition was sent to save him.

AND ON the ship speeding back to the spacelanes, Bart Caxton clawed at his shirt collar. He gasped, trying to get oxygen from the dying air. He read the gauges with incredulous eyes, then came to his feet and lurched down the corridor. He swung through the door of the tank room, swayed there, his eyes straining into the semi-darkness.

And a terrible scream ripped at his constricted throat. For he knew then the thing that Headley would shortly discover. The pools of semi-frozen liquid on Uranus were of liquid oxygen—and the animals in those pools lived on pure oxygen.

Even as he watched, one animal turned from the last tank of oxygen, ran frantically about on short legs, then collapsed, its split mouth gaping in death.

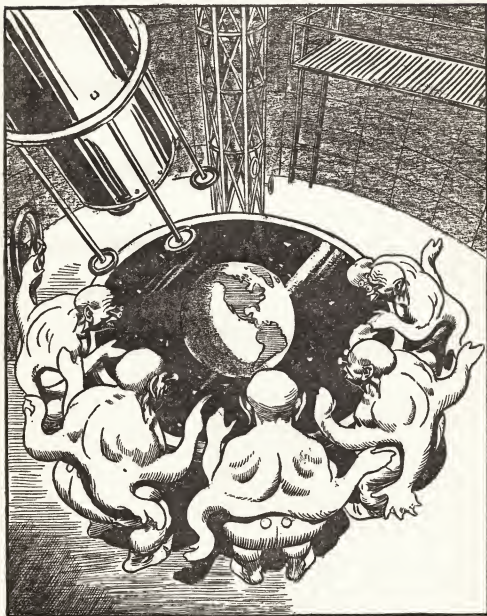
Caxton screamed, felt nausea cramping at his body. He remembered then the liquid into which he had rolled Headley's body, and he knew the other man would live to see Earth again. And he knew then that the animals in the ship had used in minutes the life-giving gas that should have lasted for days.

And even as he screamed, he fell. And the last sight he had was of the rock-animals' split mouths laughing at him and his plans in an awful mocking silence.

BLACK-OUT

By JOSEPH FARRELL

The destiny of a dying world lay in another—a blue planet which could not control its own.



"There!" Thak said, "There lies our only hope."

OLD THAK watched fondly as the new telescope was being put into its place. He had been a long time persuading the elders to build this

instrument, a duplicate of the one destroyed in the latest great war. It was as fine a telescope as Mars could produce, and only Thak's assurances that the work

was of the greatest importance had secured him this luxury.

His project must succeed, he felt, glancing at his students. Like him, they were almost spherical in shape, with fine arm-like appendages ringing their middles. They were young and enthusiastic, and Thak believed they could revive the science of astronomy. He, the last astronomer of Mars, would teach them all he knew.

The overseer of the workers was disgusted. "You waste our resources, Thak," he declared. "You have taken two years of labor by dozens of workers, and for what? So that you may look at the sky!"

Thak's tentacles purpled, a sign of irritation. "You military men!" he retorted. "It was your kind, Mitfpa, that destroyed our civilization and reduced our race to a few hungry thousands. You have ruined progress and science forever. You have hastened the death of our race. Unless—"

He waved through the open doorway, pointing out the early evening sky. Just rising over the horizon was a blue body that was of a dazzling brilliance, outshining all the other heavenly bodies. Thak's voice became emotional.

"On that planet," he said, "are civilized beings. They hold the only hope for the salvation of our race. We must work to contact them, as long as there is one of us to carry on!"

"What is this, Thak?" Mitfpa demanded angrily. "How can you say, old one, that people of intelligence live on the blue planet? You will tell me next that you have been there!"

The soldier laughed scornfully, but Thak's voice was unruffled as he explained. "This is no mere fancy of mine. These people have been signalling to us for some time. And when I signalled back by creating a network of space-warping lines through our entire power system, they strengthened their signals. Then came your war—"

"Space warps?" Mitfpa growled. "More power wasted? How was this accomplished?"

The workers were bolting the last legs of the telescope into position, and the students were making happy squeaks. Thak looked gratefully toward his new instrument, and toward the scholars. A fine lot of young ones, these. Perhaps,

in them, astronomy would become once more a science of great importance. Perhaps they would be the salvation of Mars.

He answered Mitfpa's questions. "The power used was very small. You have heard of controlled space warps?"

"What about it?" grumbled the soldier.

"An interesting laboratory trick. But it also occurs in nature. As a youth I once saw the light of stars bent around the sun in a selector-scope; indeed, it was this very phenomenon that showed our scientists how to make their own warps."

"Enough of your lecture, old one. What was the result of this scientific trickery?"

"One as stupid as you would not understand the method," Thak replied levelly, "but the result of warping all of our power beams was a network of opaque lines that to an observer would be an obvious signal. And now, if you are quite ready to leave—?"

GRUMBLING, Mitfpa departed, taking his soldier-worker with him. Thak checked the placement of the telescope, finally nodding in satisfaction as he found everything in proper order. The four students crowded around, watching with interest. He gazed good-naturedly at them.

"Our work is a great one," he declared. "We must communicate with the third planet by means of a system of signals that we shall work out—in time. But there is so little time. . . ." His tentacles curled thoughtfully about him. "You have followed the work of our last great physicist, *Mor Gran*?"

"You mean," asked an alert youngster named Rofan, "the probability tables worked out by him? Showing that the end is near for our race?"

Thak nodded sadly. "Indeed, lad, the future appears dark. War and its disorganization must inevitably strangle civilization. Even now our race is thinned in numbers, and the beasts of the desert multiply."

"There," he went on, waving toward the blue planet, "is our only hope. If we can effect communication with them, and be guided by their superior wisdom, we may yet rally. They may have some secret—some way to prevent wars—"

"You continue to speak of their superior wisdom, *Mor Thak*," said Rofan.

"How can you be so very sure of that?"

"It is obvious, lad. Their signal system consists of spots of light over the greater part of the land surface of their planet. I have shown you the old photographs, taken before the last war, showing these lights. Even with the small telescope I have been forced to use during these lean years, I have watched the lights. What a mighty science theirs must be that can make the night time light merely to signal another planet! For that can be the only purpose of the lights."

Rofan let his tentacles curl about him as he concentrated. "You must be right," he finally agreed. "I was going to suggest that they might be the lights of cities. I noticed many of them were situated where a city would be likely—but there must be millions of beings to populate so many cities—"

One of the other pupils made a loud amused noise. "Whoever heard of a city without a roof?" he demanded. "Could lights be seen through a roof?"

Rofan was embarrassed, and he remained very quiet for a while, wondering how he could have made such a stupid error. Of course lights could not be seen through a roof. And who had ever heard of a city without a roof!

Thak, paying no attention to the by-play, focused his lens with great care. The students gathered about the concave bowl of white quartz. The lights were lowered, and into the bowl moved a blurred sphere. As Thak's tentacles moved the lenses closer and closer into focus, the sphere resolved itself with more and more clarity, until it was a fine image of the third planet.

Awed by the splendor of the sight, the students could only stare. And indeed it was a breathtaking spectacle, as if they were gathered in the immense void of space itself, looking at the planet from a height of several thousand miles.

There were five continents in two major land masses, Thak had told them. In addition, there were several islands of great size, at last one being practically of conti-

mental dimensions, besides a host of islands large and small which dotted the surface of the planet.

The hemisphere on which they gazed was mostly water. The larger land mass was passing from sight. And half of the smaller mass was presented to their vision, a double continent that spread almost from pole to pole, with a narrow isthmus joining north and south.

Like all Martians, they thrilled to a scene of fearful beauty, and they stood around the quartz bowl for a long time, not speaking, merely watching the twin continents come into full view. None noticed old Thak's eyes peering desperately at the image of the third planet. Nor did they see the look of utter despair that grew in his face. They were too intent on the strange scene.

IT WAS Rofan who first felt that something was wrong. The novelty was wearing off, and an elusive thought made him uncomfortable. Something was wrong with the picture . . . what was it?

Suddenly he realized. He turned to Thak. "But—the lights, *Mor* Thak? The signals—"

Thak's face looked as old as Mars itself as he gazed at his pupil. He started to speak several times before he could manage.

"We have failed," he said, in heavy tones. "Our signals must have been too weak for the beings of the blue planet to detect. I had hoped—"

He arose and looked sadly into the evening sky. "I had hoped I was wrong. For two years now—our years—I have watched through my small telescope, and the lights have been disappearing, one by one, sometimes, but more often several at a time. I thought it was the weakness of my instrument. I was wrong. Every light on the blue planet has been blacked out . . ."

His voice was a low wail. "*And—the blacking out of those lights means a black-out of life on Mars. A planet-wide black-out . . .*"

PS's Feature Flash

FLASHING you the highlights on one of the men you've met in preceding issues—those cosmic-minded writers who help to nourish Planet Stories and the Vizigraph.

WE'VE often wondered about the thought processes of artists; we've got a rough idea of what writers and readers think about. So when Guy Gifford

artlessly (no pun) included a page of ideas for his latest "Ringers' Cartoon" with his cartoon, we thought you readers might like to peer into the depths of a cartoonist's humor.

Here is the page reproduced for your edification in all its pristine glory, signed by the ebullient Mr. Gifford, whose vocation, incidentally, is directing the artwork and editing the official organ of the Los Angeles Railway Corporation.

We hope you get a kick out of this, for we know we certainly did. We've got a hunch that Guy really likes to portray the Ringers; and we've got another hunch we like Guy. Anyway, you look.

Bridge between
golf greens
Do not drive Cosmic
pebbles from their
orbits
Whampos with
clubs on back.
Water hazard
Space ship towing half planet
"Buy all purpose
insurance at 9th hole!"
Clubhouse on
9th hole:—
Holds three planets
Out of bound
signs
sign
Siff ball
from volcano
no penalty
Life insurance
hike coffee
2000 yds.
3000 yds.
Driving range
100,000
yds.
Bird brings
back balls
Funnel
arrangement
Change Green Mo.
upside down greens
WHO DOES ALL THAT STIPPLING
MY COTTER. WHEW
Rocket golf
balls.
World dies out
for golf green
magnets
For damaging greens with rocket flame.
100 strokes - thirty days.
For using rocket golf balls - 100 strokes
For teasing natives on #77 100 strokes
For taking sand from traps - 6 months
For slowing down any revolving planet to
recover golf ball - 100 strokes - 10 years.
Penalties:
1575
Mr. Robots
allowed
to Caddy.
Hollen Fox
before driving
must
telepathy
Not responsible for
broken air helmets
from golf drives.
ADDING
MACHINES FOR
RENT AT
CLUB-HOUSE
ONLY
ONE
FOUR SOME
ALLOWED
ON SMALL
GREENS AT ONE
TIME.
IF DIFFELWHAM EATS
GOLF BALL RETRIEVE BY
TICKLING DIFFELWHAM
ON STOMACH.
DO NOT DRIVE
WATTLEBIRD'S
EGGS FROM
NEST
FOR USING REPELLENT RAY IN
DRIVING - 10 STROKES.
T.S.R. T.S.R. What a golf course
Tch Tch.

THE RINGERS TAKE UP GOLF



"THIS IS A CINCINCH PAR!! IT HAS A GRAVITY OF POINT TWENTY EIGHT!!"

CASTAWAYS OF EROS

By NELSON S. BOND

Two families fought for the title to Eros, and only one could win. One had to outsmart the other—and both had to win over the unscrupulous United Ores Corporation. It was a problem worthy of a Solomon—and it had an ending even those embittered rivals could not foresee.





Moirs reached for the twisted branch.

BOBBY couldn't help wishing Pop would stand up just a little bit straighter. Not that he was ashamed of Pop; it wasn't that at all. It was just that the Patrolman stood *so* straight, his shoulders broad and firm. Standing beside him made Pop look sort of thin and puny; his chest caved in like he was car-

rying a heavy weight on his shoulders.

That was from studying things through a microscope. Anyhow, decided Bobby a with a fierce loyalty, that S.S.P. man probably wouldn't even know what to look for if somebody put a microscope in front of him. Even if he was big and sturdy and broad-shouldered in his space blues.

Mom said, "Bobby, what *are* you muttering about? Do stop fidgeting!" Bobby said, "Yessum," and glared at Moira, as if she, in some obscure way, were to blame for his having been reprimanded right out here in the middle of Long Island Spaceport, where everybody could hear and laugh at him. But Moira, studying the handsome S.S.P. man surreptitiously, did not notice. Dick was fixing something in the ship. Eleanor stood quietly beside Mom, crooning softly to The Pooch so it wouldn't be scared by the thunderous blast of rocket motors. Grampaw Moseley had buttonholed an embarrassed young ensign, was complaining to him in loud and certain terms that modern astronavigation practices were, "Rank bellywash, Mister, and a dad-ratted disgrace!"

The Patrolman said, "Your name, please, Sir?"

"Robert Emmet O'Brien Moseley," said Pop.

"Occupation?"

"Research physicist, formerly. Now about to become a land-grant settler."

"Age of self and party . . . former residence. . . ."

Overhead, the sky was blue and thin-clear as a bowl of skimmed milk; its vastness limned in sharp relief, to the west and north, the mighty spans and arches, the faery domes and flying buttresses of Great New York. The spacedrome fed a hundred ducts of flight; from one field lifted air locals, giddy, colored motes with gyroscopes aspin. From another, a West Coast stratoliner surged upward to lose itself in thin, dim heights.

Vast cradles by the Sound were the nests to which a flock of interplanetary craft made homeward flight. Luggers and barges and cruisers. Bobby saw, with sudden excitement, the sharp, starred prow of the Solar Space Patrol man-o'-war.

Here, in this field, the GSC's—the General Spacecraft Cradles. From one of which, as soon as Pop got clearance, their

ship would take off. Their ship! Bobby felt an eager quickening of his pulse; his stomach was aswarm with a host of butterflies. *Their ship!*

The space officer said, "I think that takes care of everything, Dr. Moseley. I presume you understand the land-grant laws and obligations?"

"Yes, Lieutenant."

"Very well, then—" Space-red hands made official motions with a hand-stamp and pen. "Your clearance. And my very best wishes, Sir."

"Thank you," said Pop quietly. He turned. "That's all. Ready, Mother? Eleanor? Moira?"

Bobby bounded forward. "Can I push the button, can I, Pop? When we start, can I?"

DICK was waiting before the open lock of the *Cuchulainn*. Dick could do anything, everything at once. He took The Pooch into the circle of his left arm, helped his mother aboard, said, "Shut up, kid, you're enough to wake the dead. Watch that guard-panel, Elly. Papers all set, Pop?" And he tickled The Pooch's dimpled cheek with an oily finger. "You act just like your mama," he said irrelevantly, and the baby gurgled. Eleanor cried, "Dick—those dirty hands!"

"Everything is in order, Richard," said Pop.

"Good. You folks go in and strap down. I'll seal. Here comes the cradle-monkey now."

Pop said, "Come along, Robert," and the others went inside. Bobby waited, though, to see the cradle-monkey, the man under whose orders spacecraft lifted gravs. The cradle-monkey was a dour man with gnarled legs and arms and temper. He looked at the *Cuchulainn* and sniffed; then at Dick.

"Family crate, huh?"

"That's right."

"Well, f'r goddlemighty' sakes, don't try to blast off with y'r side jets burnin'. Take a seven-point-nineteen readin' on y'r Akka gauge, stern rockets only—"

"Comets to you, butt-hoister!" grinned Dick. "I've had eight years on the spider run. I can lift this can."

"Oh, a rocketeer?" There was new, grudging respect in the groundman's tone.

"Well, how was I t' know? Y'ought t' see what some o' them jaloupi-jockeys do to my cradles—burn 'em black! Oh, well—" He backed away from the ship.

"Clean ether!" said Dick. He closed the lock. Its seal-brace slid into place, wheezing asthmatically. Bobby's ears rang suddenly with the mild compression of air; when he swallowed, they were all right again. Dick saw him. "What are you doing here, kid? Didn't I hear Pop tell you to come below?"

Bobby said, "I'm not a kid. I'm almost sixteen."

"Just old enough," promised Dick, "to get your seat warmed if you don't do what you're told. Remember, you're a sailor on a spaceship now. Pop's the Skipper, and I'm First Mate. If you don't obey orders, it's mutiny, and—"

"I'm obeying," said Bobby hastily. He followed his brother down the corridor, up the ramp, to the bridge. "Can I push the button when we take off, huh, Dick?"

After his high expectations, it wasn't such a great thrill. Dick set the stops and dials, told him which button to press. "When I give the word, kid." Of course, he got to sit in the pilot's bucket-chair, which was something. Moira and Eleanor and Mom to lie down in acceleration hammocks while Pop and Dick sat in observation seats. He waited, all ears and nerves, as the slow seconds sloughed away. Pop set the hypos running; their faint, dull throb was a magic sound in the silence.

Then there came a signal from outside. Dick's hand rose in understanding response; fell again. "Now!"

BOBBOY jabbed the button in frantic haste. Suddenly the silence was shattered by a thunderous detonation. There was a massive hand pressing him back into the soft, yielding leather of his chair; the chair retreated on oiled channels, pneumatic compensators hissing faintly, absorbing the shock. Across the room a faulty hammock-hinge squeaked rustily.

Then it was over as quickly as it had begun, and he could breathe again, and Dick was lurching across the turret on feet that wobbled queerly because up was down and top was bottom and everything was funny and mixed up.

5—Planet Stories—Winter

Dick cut in the artificial grays, checked the meter dials with a hurried glance, smiled.

"Dead on it! Want to check, Skipper?"

But Pop was standing by the observation pane, eyeing an Earth already ball-like in the vastness of space. Earth, dwindling with each passing moment. Bobby moved to his side and watched; Moira, too, and Eleanor and Mom, and even Dick.

Pop touched Mom's hand. He said, "Martha—I'm not sure this is fair to you and the children. Perhaps it isn't right that I should force my dream on all of you. The world we have known and loved lies behind us. Before us lies only uncertainty. . . ."

Mom sort of sniffed and reached for a handkerchief. She turned her back to Pop for a minute, and when she turned around again her eyes were red and angry-looking. She said, "You want to go on, don't you, Rob?"

Pop nodded. "But I'm thinking of you, Martha."

"Of me!" Mom snorted indignantly. "Hear him talk! I never heard such nonsense in my life. Of *course* I want to go on. No, never mind that! Richard, isn't there a kitchen on this boat?"

"A galley, Mom. Below."

"Galley . . . kitchen . . . what's the difference? You two girls come with me. I'll warrant these men are starving. I am!"

AFTER THAT, things became so normal as to be almost disappointing. From his eager reading of such magazines as *Martian Tales* and *Cosmic Fiction Weekly*, Bobby had conceived void-travel to be one long, momentous chain of adventure. A super-thrilling serial, punctuated by interludes with space-pirates, narrow brushes with meteors, sabotage, treachery — hair-raising, heroic and horrifying.

There was nothing like that to disturb the calm and peaceful journey of the *Cuchulainn*. Oh, it was enjoyable to stare through the observation panes at the flame-dotted pall of space—until Pop tried to turn his curious interest into educational channels; it was exciting, too, to probe through the corridor recesses of their floating home—except that Dick issued

strict orders that nothing must be touched, that he must not enter certain chambers, that he mustn't push his nose into things that didn't concern kids—

Which offended Bobby, who was sixteen Or, anyway, fifteen and three-quarters.

So they ate and they slept and they ate again. And Pop and Dick spelled each other at the control banks. Moira spent endless hours with comb and mirror, devising elaborate hair-dos which—Bobby reminded her with impudent shrewdness—were so much wasted energy, since they were settling in a place where nobody could see them. And Mom bustled about in the galley, performing miracles with flour and stuff, and in the recreation room, Eleanor minded The Pooch, and lost innumerable games of cribbage to Grampaw Moseley who cheated outrageously and groused, between hands, about the dad-blame nonsensical way Dick was handling the ship.

And somehow three Earth days sped by, and they were nearing their destination. The tiny planetoid, Eros.

Pop said, "You deserve a great deal of credit, son, for your fine work in rehabilitating the *Cuchulainn*. It has performed beautifully. You are a good spaceman."

Dick flushed. "She's a good ship, Pop, even if she is thirty years old. Some of these old, hand-fashioned jobs are better than the flash junk they're turning off the belts nowadays. You've checked the declension and trajectory?"

"Yes. We should come within landing radius in just a few hours. Cut drives at 19.04.22 precisely and made such minor course alterations as are necessary, set brakes." Pop smiled happily. "We're very fortunate, son. A mere fifteen million miles. It's not often Eros is so near Earth."

"Don't I know it? It's almost a hundred million at perihelion. But that's not the lucky part. You sure had to pull strings to get the government land grant to Eros. What a plum! Atmosphere . . . water . . . vegetable life . . . all on a hunk of dirt fifty-seven miles in diameter. Frankly, I don't get it! Eros must have terrific mass to have the attributes of a full-sized planet."

"It does, Richard. A neutronium core."

"Neutronium!" Dick gasped. "Why

don't people tell me these things? Roaring craters, Pop, we're rich! Bloated plutocrats!"

"Not so fast, son. Eventually, perhaps; not today. First we must establish our claims, justify our right to own Eros. That means work, plenty of hard work. After that, we might be able to consider a mining operation. What's that?"

Bobby jumped. It was Mom's voice. But her cry was not one of fear, it was one of excitement.

"Rob, look! Off to the—the left, or the port, or whatever you call it! Is that our new home?"

Bobby did not need to hear Pop's reply to know that it was. His swift intake of breath was enough, the shine in his eyes as he peered out the observation port.

"Eros!" he said.

It looked all right to Bobby. A nice, clean little sphere, spinning lazily before their eyes like a top someone had set in motion, then gone away and forgotten. Silver and green and rusty brown, all still faintly blued by distance. The warm rays of old Sol reflected gaily, giddily, from seas that covered half the planetoid's surface, and mountains cut long, jagged shadows into sheltered plains beneath them. It was, thought Bobby, not a bad looking little place. But not anything to get all dewy-eyed about, like Pop was.

Dick said softly, "All right, Pop. Let's check and get ready to set 'er down. . . ."

II

IT WAS NOT Dick's fault. It was just a tough break that no one had expected, planned for, guarded against. The planetoid was there beneath them; they would land on it. It was as simple as that.

Only it wasn't. Nor did they have any warning that the problem was more complex until it was too late to change their plans, too late to halt the irrevocable movements of a grounding spaceship. Dick should have known, of course. He was a spaceman; he had served two tricks on the Earth-Venus-Mars run. But all those planets were large; Eros was just a mote. A spinning top. . . .

Anyway, it was after the final coordinates had been plotted, the last bank control unchangeably set, the rockets cut, that

they saw the curved knife-edge of black slicing up over Eros' rim. For a long moment Dick stared at it, a look of angry chagrin in his eyes.

"Well, blast me for an Earth-lubbing idiot! Do you see that, Pop?"

Pop looked like he had shared Dick's persimmon.

"The night-line. We forgot to consider the diurnal revolution."

"And now we've got to land in the dark. On strange terrain. Arragh! I should have my head examined. I've got a plugged tube somewhere!"

Grampaw Moseley hobbled in, appraised the situation with his incomparable ability to detect something amiss. He snorted and rattled his cane on the floor.

"They's absolutely nothin'," he informed the walls, "to this hereditation stuff. Elst why should my own son an' his son be so dag-nabbed stoopid?"

"What can't be cured," said Pop mildly, "must be endured." We have the forward search-beams, son. They will help."

That was sheer optimism. As they neared the planet its gravitational attraction seized them tighter and tighter until they were completely under its compulsion. Dusk swept down upon them, the sunlight dulled, faded, grayed. Then as the ship nosed downward, suddenly all was black. The yellow beam of the search stabbed reluctant shadows, bringing rocky crags and rounded tors into swift, terrifying relief.

Dick snapped, "Into your hammocks, everyone! Don't worry. This crate will stand a lot of bust-up. It's tough. A little bit of luck—"

But there was perspiration on his forehead, and his fingers played over the control banks like frightened moths.

There was no further need for the artificial gravs. Eros exerted, strangely, incredibly, an attractive power almost as potent as Earth's. Dick cut off the gravs, then the hypos. As the last machine-created sound died away from the cabin, Bobby heard the high scream of atmosphere, raging and tearing at the *Cuchulainn* with angry fingers.

Through howling Bedlam they tumbled dizzily and for moments that were ages long. While Dick labored frantically at the controls, while Moira watched with

bated breath. Mom said nothing, but her hand sought Pop's; Eleanor cradled The Pooch closer to her. Grampaw scowled.

And then, suddenly—

"Hold tight! We're grounding!" cried Dick.

And instinctively Bobby braced himself for a shock. But there was only a shuddering jar, a lessening of the roar that beat upon their eardrums, a dull, flat thud. A sodden, heavy grinding and the groan of metal forward. Then a false nausea momentarily assailed him. Because for the first time in days the *Cuchulainn* was completely motionless.

Dick grinned shakily. "Well!" he said. "Well!"

Pop unbuckled his safety belt, climbed gingerly out of his hammock, moved to the port, slid back its lock-plate. Bobby said, "Can you see anything, Pop? Can you?" And Mom, who could read Pop's expressions like a book, said, "What is it, Rob?"

Pop stroked his chin. He said, "Well, we've landed safely, Richard. But I'm afraid we've—er—selected a wet landing field. We seem to be under water!"

His hazard was verified immediately. Indisputably. For from the crack beneath the door leading from the control turret to the prow-chambers of the ship, came a dark trickle that spread and puddled and stained and gurgled. Water!

Dick cried, "Hey, this is bad! We'd better get out of here—"

HE LEAPED to his controls. Once more the plaintive hum of the hypatomics droned through the cabin, gears ground and clashed as the motors caught, something forward exploded dully, distantly. The ship rocked and trembled, but did not move. Again Dick tried to jet the fore-rockets. Again, and yet again.

And on the fourth essay, there ran through the ship a violent shudder, broken metal grated shrilly from forward, and the water began bubbling and churning through the crack. Deeper and swifter. Dick cut motors and turned, his face an angry mask.

"We can't get loose. The entire nose must be stove in! We're leaking like a sieve. Look, everybody—get into your bulgers. We'll get out through the airlock!"

Mom cried, "But—but our supplies, Dick! What are we going to do for food, clothing, furniture—?"

"We'll worry about that later. Right now we've got to think of ourselves. That—aboy, Bobby! Thanks for getting 'em out. You girls remember how to climb into 'em? Eleanor—you take that oversized one. That's right. There's room for you and The Pooch—"

The water was almost ankle deep in the control room by the time they had all donned spacesuits. Bloated figures in fabricoid bulgers, they followed Dick to the airlock. It was weird, and a little bit frightening, but to Bobby it was thrilling, too. This was the sort of thing you read stories about. Escape from a flooding ship. . . .

They had time—or took time—to gather together a few precious belongings. Eleanor packed a carrier with baby food for The Pooch, Mom a bundle of provisions hastily swept from the galley bins; Pop remembered the medical kit and the tool-box, Grampaw was laden down with blankets and clothing, Dick burdened himself and Bobby with armloads of such things as he saw and forevisioned need for.

At the lock, Dick issued final instructions.

"The air in the bulgers will carry you right to the surface. We'll gather there, count noses, and decide on our next move. Pop, you go first to lead the way, then Mom, and Eleanor, Grampaw—"

Thus, from the heart of the doomed *Cuchulainn*, they fled. The airlock was small. There was room for but one at a time. The water was waist—no, breast-deep—by the time all were gone save Bobby and Dick. Bobby, whose imagination had already assigned him the command of the foundering ship, wanted to uphold the ancient traditions by being the last to leave. But Dick had other ideas. He shoved Bobby—not too gently—into the lock. Then there was water, black, solid, forbidding, about him. And the outer door opening.

He stepped forward. And floated upward, feeling an uneasy, quibbly feeling in his stomach. Almost immediately a hard something *clanged!* against his impervite helmet; it was a lead-soled bulger boot; then he was bobbing and tossing on shal-

low black wavelets beside the others.

Above him was a blue-black, star-gemmed sky; off to his right, not distant, was a rising smudge that must be the mainland. A dark blob popped out of the water. Dick.

Dick's voice was metallic through the audios of the space-helmet. "All here, Pop? Everybody all right? Swell! Let's strike out for the shore, there. Stick together, now. It isn't far."

Pop said, "The ship, Richard?"

"We'll find it again. I floated up a marking buoy. That round thing over there isn't Grampaw."

Grampaw's voice was raucous, belligerent. "You bet y'r boots it ain't! I'm on my way to terry firmy. The last one ashore's a sissy!"

Swimming in a bulger, Bobby found, was silly. Like paddling a big, warm, safe rubber rowboat. The stars winked at him, the soft waves explored his face-plate with curious, white fingers of spray. Pretty soon there was sand scraping his boots . . . a long, smooth beach with rolling hills beyond.

IN THE sudden scarlet of dawn, it was impossible to believe the night had even been frightening. Throughout the night, the Moseley clan huddled together there on the beach, waiting, silent, wondering. But when the sun burst over the horizon like a clamoring, brazen gong, they looked upon this land which was their new home—and found it good.

The night did not last long. But Pop had told them it would not.

"Eros rotates on its axis," he explained, "in about ten hours, forty minutes, Earth time measurement. Therefore we shall have 'days' and 'nights' of five hours; short dawns or twilights. This will vary somewhat, you understand, with the change of seasons."

Dick asked, "Isn't that a remarkably slow rotation? For such a tiny planet, I mean? After all, Eros is only one hundred and eighty odd miles in circumference—"

"Eros has many peculiarities. Some of them we have discussed before. It approaches Earth nearer than any other celestial body, excepting Luna and an occasional meteor or comet. When first discovered by Witt, in 1898, the world of sci-

ence marveled at finding a true planetoid with such an uncommon orbit. At perihelion it comes far within the orbit of Mars; at aphelion it is far outside.

"During its near approach in 1900-01, Eros was seen to vary in brightness at intervals of five hours and fifteen or twenty minutes. At that time, a few of the more imaginative astronomers offered the suggestion that this variation might be caused by diurnal rotation. After 1931, though, the planetoid fled from Earth. It was not until 1975, the period of its next approach, that the Ronaldson-Chenwith expedition visited it and determined the old presumption to be correct."

"We're not the first men to visit Eros, then?"

"Not at all. It was investigated early in the days of spaceflight. Two research foundations, the Royal Cosmographic Society and the Interplanetary Service, sent expeditions here. During the Black Douglass period of terrorism, the S.S.P. set up a brief military occupation. The Galactic Metals Corporation at one time attempted to establish mining operations here, but the Bureau refused them permission, for under the Spacecode of '08, it was agreed by the Triune that all asteroids should be settled under land-grant law.

"That is why," concluded Pop, "we are here now. As long as I can remember, it has been my dream to take a land-grant colony for my very own. Long years ago I decided that Eros should be my settlement. As you have said, Richard, it necessitated the pulling of many strings. Eros is a wealthy little planet; the man who earns it wins a rich prize. More than that, though—" Pop lifted his face to the skies, now blue with hazy morning. There was something terribly bright and proud in his eyes. "More than that, there is the desire to carve a home out of the wilderness. To be able to one day say, 'Here is my home that I have molded into beauty with my own hands.' Do you know what I mean, son? In this workaday world of ours there are no more Earthly frontiers for us to dare, as did our forefathers. But still within us all stirs the deep, instinctive longing to hew a new home from virgin land—"

His words dwindled into silence, and,

inexplicably, Bobby felt awed. It was Grampaw Moseley who burst the queer moment into a thousand spluttering fragments.

"Talkin' about hewin'," he said, "S'posen we hew us a few vittles? Hey?"

Dick roused himself.

"Right you are, Grampaw," he said. "You can remove your bulgars. I've tested the air; it's fine and warm, just as the report said. Moira, while Mom and Eleanor are fixing breakfast, suppose you lay out our blankets and spare clothing to dry? Grampaw, get a fire going. Pop and Bobby and I will get some wood."

Thus Eros greeted its new masters, and the Moseleys faced morning in their new Eden.

III

GRAMPAW MOSELEY wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. There were no napkins, which suited him fine.

"It warn't," he said, "a bad meal. But it warn't a fust-class un, neither. Them synthos an' concentrates ain't got no more flavor than—"

Bobby agreed with him. Syntho ham wasn't too bad. It had a nice, meaty taste. And syntho coffee tasted pretty much like the real thing. But those syntho eggs tasted like nothing under the sun except just plain, awful syntho eggs.

Four Eros days—the equivalent of forty-two Earth hours or so—had passed since their crash landing. In that short time, much had been done to make their beach camp-site comfortable. All members of the family were waiting now for Dick to return.

Pop said seriously, "I'm afraid you'll have to eat them and like them for a little while, Father. We can't get fresh foods until we're settled; we can't settle until— Ah! Here comes Dick!"

"I'll eat 'em," grumbled Grampaw, "but be durned if I'll like 'em. What'd you l'arn, Dicky-boy?"

Dick removed his helmet, unzipped himself from his bulger, shook his head.

"It looks worse every time I go back. I may not be able to get in the airlock again if the ship keeps on settling. The whole prow split wide open when we hit,

the ship is full of water. The flour and sugar and things like that are ruined. I managed to get a few more things out, though. Some tools, guns, wire—stuff like that."

"How about the hypatomic?"

"Let him eat, Rob," said Mom. "He's hungry."

"I can eat and talk at the same time, Mom. I think I can get the hypatomic out. I'd better, anyhow. If we're ever going to raise the ship, we'll need power. And atomic power is the only kind we can get in this wilderness." And he shook his head. "But we can't do it in a day or a week. It will take time."

"Time," said Pop easily, "is the one commodity with which we are over-supplied." He thought for a minute. "If that's the way it is, we might as well move."

"Move?" demanded Grampaw. "What's the matter with the place we're at?"

"For one thing, it's too exposed. An open beach is no place for a permanent habitation. So far we've been very lucky. We've had no storms. But for a permanent camp-site, we must select a spot further inland. A fertile place, where we can start crops. A place with fresh, running water, natural shelter against cold and wind and rain—"

"What'll we do?" grinned Dick. "Flip a coin?"

"No. Happily, there is a spot like that within an easy walk of here. I discovered it yesterday while studying the terrain." Pop took a stick, scratched a rude drawing on the sand before him. "This is the coastline. We landed on the west coast of this inlet. The land we see across there, that low, flat land, I judge to be delta islands. Due south of us is a fine, fresh-water river, watering fertile valleys to either side. There, I think, we should build."

Dick nodded.

"Fish from the sea, vegetables from our own farm—is there any game, Pop?"

"That I don't know. We haven't seen any. Yet."

"We'll find out. Will this place you speak of be close enough to let me continue working on the *Cuchulainn*? Yes? Well, that's that. When do we start?"

"Why not now? There's nothing to keep us here."

THEY packed their meager belongings while Dick finished his meal; the sun was high when they left the beach. They followed the shore line southward, the ground rising steadily before them. And before evening, they came to a rolling vale through which a sparkling river meandered lazily to the sea.

Small wonders unfolded before their eyes. Marching along, they had discovered that there was game on Eros. Not quite Earthly, of course—but that was not to be expected. There was one small, furry beast about the size of a rabbit, only its color was vivid leaf-green. Once, as they passed a wooded glen, a pale, fawnlike creature stole from the glade, watched them with soft, curious eyes. Another time they all started violently as the familiar siren of a Patrol monitor screamed raucously from above them; they looked up to see an irate, orange and jade-green bird glaring down at them.

And of course there were insects—

"There would have to be insects," Pop said. "There could be no fruitful vegetable life without insects. Plants need bees and crawling ants—or their equivalent—to carry the pollen from one flower to another."

They chose a site on the riverside, a half mile or so from, above, and overlooking the sea. They selected it because a spring of pure, bubbling water was nearby, because the woodlands dwindled away into lush fields. And Pop said,

"This is it. We'll build our home on yonder knoll. And who knows—" Again there grew that strange look in his eyes. "Who knows but that it may be the shoot from which, a time hence, there may spring many cabins, then finer homes, and buildings, and mansions, until at last there is a great, brave city here on this port by the delta—"

"That's it, Pop!" said Dick suddenly. "There's the name for our settlement. Delta Port!"

SO, SWIFTLY, sped the next weeks, and Bobby was not able, afterward, to tell where they had gone. Time lightens labor; labor hastens time. But fleeing hours left in their wake tangible evidence of their passage—a change, a growth in Delta Port,

One of Pop's first moves had been an attempted reorganization of their work-hours on an Eros basis.

"We cannot here," he explained, "try to maintain our Earthly habit of sleeping through night hours, working during the day. Therefore—"

And he laid out for them an intricate and elaborate "nine day week" he had devised; broken into alternate sleep-and-labor, meal-and-recreation periods. It was an ingenious system. But—

It didn't work.

Despite previous habits, after a short time men and women, old and young alike, found themselves growing drowsy as dusk crept in. There was a general quickening of life's tempo to meet the conditions prevalent on Eros; the familiar "three meals a day" ceased to have meaning; the old habit of sleeping eight hours at one stretch became anomalous under a sky which waxed and waned from brightness to dark in that length of time. Imperceptibly at first, then more and more openly, all found themselves working into a new routine. A design for living under which they tumbled into bed for four hours of darkness, slept suddenly and heartily, woke again, pursued a half dozen hours of work or play, then napped once more.

It seemed the most natural thing in the world. And Pop, never satisfied until he could explain such things, finally found an answer.

"I remember, now, that 'way back in the early years of the Twentieth Century a group of psychologists from one of the American universities tried an experiment. They put two men in a sealed, walled, sound-proof room which was neither dark nor light, but was kept constantly a dull, twilight gray.

"They gave the men—who all their lives had lived on the accepted Early standard—instructions to sleep when they felt drowsy, eat whenever they felt the desire to do so. After an exceptionally short time, the life-habits of these human guinea-pigs altered remarkably. They began eating not thrice a way, but at intervals ranging from every three to six hours.

"As for sleeping, the experimenters found it natural to cat-nap for four hour stretches rather than sustain strength on one, long, tiresome eight hour sleep-period.

"This experiment was duplicated in 1987, under John Carberry of Columbia, with identical results. The research doctors were forced to the conclusion that Man is, on Earth, responsive to the conditions under which he must live. That is, he has adapted himself to Earth's phenomena. But could his body attain its natural and normal, uninhibited desires, it would live *precisely as we here on Eros are living!* At a wake-sleep pace of alternate four and six hours!"

IT WAS just like Pop to get excited about a problem of that nature when there were so many other things crying to be done. But Bobby was surprised, from time to time, to discover that in a pinch Pop could bob up with an answer to a stumping question quite unrelated to the field of empiric science.

It was Pop who, when Dick was having trouble making their minute supply of nails and braces do for the construction of the cabin, offered the suggestion that the joists be joined by hollowing. It worked. End logs dove-tailed beautifully; the cabin walls stood firmer and looked neater than if laboriously spliced together with metal.

It was Pop, too, who did something about the plate problem. Unable to bring the plastics with them in their hasty flight from the sunken *Cuchulainn*, the Moseley family had made rude shift first with large flat, washed leaves, then with shells taken from the beach, at last with wooden slabs planed down by Grampaw.

Pop, annoyed with these slovenly substitutes, spent several hours wandering by the shore, through the hills, up the river; finally returned one afternoon triumphantly bearing a lump of grayish mud as large as his head. Ignoring all caustic queries and comments, he set about molding this into a plate—and after much fingering, succeeded in flattening it into a recognizable shape.

It seemed to bother him not a whit that the finished product was deckle-edged and wobbly. He set it out in the sun to dry; a day later carried it triumphantly to the table and demanded his meal be served in it.

"Pottery!" he said. "From a fine clay bed up Erin River!"

Then he placed his pottery plate on the

table with firm hands, and at that imperceptible jar, it promptly fell into five pieces!

But a beginning had been made, and curiously enough it was Moira who became interested in this obscure art of ceramics. The Moseleys continued to eat from wooden slabs for some weeks, while Moira begrimed her fingers with mud that invariably turned to crisp, fragile clay—and then one day she completed a bowl made of substance from which all sand-grains and small pebbles had been painstakingly sieved, and which had been allowed to dry slowly under damp grass. And *this* time it did not crack. Within a fortnight, a complete set of crockery made its appearance in the culinary department.

At which point Dick began talking vaguely about the construction of a kiln, and Moira started thinking about the possibilities of decorating her proud young chinaware.

So the weeks passed, and it was surprising how much had been accomplished, and how complete and happy life could be, even without the infinitude of small comforts to which they had once been accustomed, and which, on Earth, they had expected and accepted unthinkingly.

There was no *teleo* to entertain them, but somehow nobody seemed to miss its raucous, glowing presence in the living room; not even Bobby whose greatest interest in life had once been the nightly adventures of *The Red Patrolman*, transmitted through the courtesy of United Syntho Cereals. Grampaw Moseley made music with a battered banjo he had salvaged from the *Cuchulainn*; they all sang, and sometimes they danced, too. That was what Moira liked; she'd fix herself all up real pretty and dance and dance, even though her partners were Dick and Pop, who didn't dance the modern swoop-steps very well, and Bobby, who pretended to dislike it very thoroughly, but thought it was kind of fun.

GRAMPAW carved a cribbage set, too; they played it, and chess, and card games during storms that kept them housebound. Dick, in occasional hours of leisure, cleared a fair athletic field outside. They had a quoits' run, a badminton court (a little uneven, but nobody minded) and a

shuffleboard plane; also a fine sand-pit for The Pooch.

Pop had planned the house with his usual mathematical forevision. From its first two rooms, built with an eye to offering swift shelter, soon spread wings. Before long it had four separate bedrooms, a kitchen, a dining-nook, and the living- or meeting-room, which Grampaw called the "git-together" room. There was also a cisterned refreshing-room, and another would be added as soon as Dick devised a method of supplying the house with fresh, running water.

Meanwhile, Mom and Eleanor and Grampaw Moseley were to be thanked for the steady improvement in their menu.

Grampaw had early set out his farm; it was a sight to see him hobbling up and down the neat, even rows, weeding his springing crops, swearing at insect interlopers. Luckily the sealed containers of seeds had not suffered the fate of Mom's lamented sugar and flour supply; the Moseleys had already nibbled tentatively at stubby radishes, tiny, crumpled leaves of lettuce—and in another month or so there would be more substantial root and fruit stocks. Potatoes, parsnips, beans, turnips, beets, tomatoes, corn, salsify, onions.

And wheat! That was the crop most tenderly watched, most hopefully awaited. Wheat meant bread; bread was life. And the wheat was rippling up in soft, green wavelets.

Meanwhile, Eros itself supplied many—if unusual!—foodstuffs. Every member of the family watched, carefully, the eating habits of Erosian small-life; adapted to their own diet the fruits, seeds, berries, eaten by native animals, and avoided those things which, no matter how luscious to look on, the birds and beasts eschewed. Some day, when Pop's laboratory equipment could be brought from the sunken ship, they would find out about these questionable foods. But for now, it was best to be on the safe side.

Artificial light remained a problem. There were tiny search batteries in their bulgers, but they used these only in cases of necessity; they had no oil for lamps even if they had owned lamps. Eleanor made a few fat, greasy, ill-shapen candles out of renderings, but these spluttered and dripped and lasted but a short time. Aboard

the *Cuchulainn* were all sorts of books, telling how to make candles properly. But these were, by now, water-soaked and illegible.

So they contrived to get by with little illumination, looking forward to the day when Dick should succeed in raising the hypatomic motor from the ship. Then they would have all the light and heat and power they wanted. All from a cupful of water, or a handful of sand swept up from the beach.

And all was peaceful and quiet. Until one day there came a startled shout from the fields, the sound of excited footsteps, and Grampaw came hobbling into the house yelling, "Where's m' gun? Marthy, drad-rat it, where'd y' put m' gun?"

Dick grinned and winked at the others and asked, "What's the matter, Grampaw? The moles getting into your garden?" And chuckled as Grampaw grabbed up his pierce-gun and hobbled away. Chuckled, that is, until the old man's answer came floating back over his shoulder.

"Moles be durned! It's hooman-bein's, that's what it is. *In-trudin'* on our property!"

Then Dick roared, "Hey, Grampaw, wait! Put that gun down! Don't try to—Come on, everyone!"

They all went tumbling from the house. And it was exactly as Grampaw had said. Approaching Delta Port, some on foot, some astride animals curiously horselike save that they had six legs and long, shaggy hair, came a tiny group of men and women. Six in number.

Their leader was a man of Pop's age, a baldish man, heavy-set and capable looking. Besides him rode a thin, tired looking woman of forty-odd. Next came a short, pudgy, white-haired man; then, herding beside him two youngsters, a boy of Bobby's age and a girl slightly younger, came the last member of the party. A slim, tall young man with a mop of cinnamon-colored hair.

The two groups, one nearing the house, one emerging from it, saw each other at practically the same time. For a moment, no one spoke on either side. Dick had taken the gun from Grampaw's hands, had successfully concealed it. And now Pop broke the silence.

"Greetings, strangers!" he cried heartily.

"You're plenty welcome to Delta Port!"

Then came the shockingly unexpected reply, from the leader of the newcomers.

"Greetings yourself, Mister! And what in tarnation thunder are you doing on my land?"

IV

GRAMPAW MOSELEY was a man of action. He groped for the rifle swinging loosely in Dick's grasp. He said, "Gimme! Minute I set eyes on that fat ol' popinjay I knew—"

Dick said, "Hush, Grampaw!" and looked at Pop. Pop looked baffled. He watched speechlessly as the caravan drew up beside the, the members dismounted from their odd beasts of burden. Then he said, hesitantly, "There seems to be some misunderstanding here, stranger. Allow me to introduce myself and my family. I am Robert Moseley. This is my father, my wife, my son and his wife and child, my other children—"

The heavy-set man made no offer to shake hands. He grunted, "Meetcha! I'm Sam Wilkes. This is my wife, my dad, my kids." He stared at the house, the cultivated fields. A look of grudging respect was in his eyes; there was a touch of envy, too. "Been doin' all right for yourself, ain't you? For a squatter!"

Pop said slowly, "Squatter, sir? I'm afraid there's some mistake. This property—as a matter of fact, this entire planetoid—is mine under Earth land-grant law. Now, if you will be kind enough to explain your presence—"

"Yours!" Sam Wilkes' ruddy countenance darkened with outrage. "Earth land-grant! Bessie, where'd I put that—Oh, here it is! Take a look at this, Mr. Moseley!"

He slapped a strip of parchment into Pop's hand, and Pop unfolded it carefully. Dick looked over his shoulder. One of the curious, six-legged beasts skittered nervously and Bobby started. The rusty-thatched boy who had dismounted from it grinned impishly. He said, "What's the matter, skinny, you scared of him?"

Bobby said, "Of course not!" and watched the animal from the corner of one eye. "What is it?"

"A gooldak. We brought it here from

home. Fastest thing on legs. What's your name?"

"Bobby. What's yours? And what do you mean—home?"

"Sam. They call me Junior. Why, home is Mars, of course. Where'd you think?"

That word was being echoed now by Dick.

"Mars! This is a land-grant charter issued by the Martian government! But—but—Pop, show him yours!"

"Don't do nothin' of the sort, son!" chirped Grampaw belligerently. "That there scrip o' his'n is prob'ly fake! Don't explain nothin' to 'em. Jist tell 'em to git!"

The roly-poly father of Sam Wilkes turned a querulous eye on Grampaw.

"Who's the antique?" he demanded throatily. "Sounds to me like one of them big-talkin', poor-scrappin' Earth soldiers I fit in the Upland Rebellion."

"Upland Rebellion!" howled Grampaw. "Was *you* one o' the rebels we chased from the deserts to the Pole? I might of knowed it! Gimme that gun, Dick—"

"Please, Grampaw!" begged Dick. He looked at Wilkes. "My father was right, Mr. Wilkes. There is a dreadful mistake here. Apparently the Colonial offices of Earth and Mars have disagreed on the ownership of this planetoid; your government has issued a land-grant on it, and so has ours."

"Asteroids," said Wilkes, "are Martian. Their very orbits prove—"

"I beg your pardon," interrupted Pop firmly. "Eros' orbit is between Earth and Mars at this moment. It is a part of Earth's empire."

"Is it true," Bobby asked Junior, wide-eyed, "that pirate gangs hide in the Martian deserts? I heard—"

"Shucks, no! We used to live in East Redlands, they wasn't no pirates anywheres about. Were you ever in Chicago, Skinny? Is it true there's a building there two miles high?"

"Two and a half," said Bobby complacently. "And it covers six city blocks. And my name's not 'Skinny'."

"—you'll notice," Wilkes was grunting, "my grant is dated prior to yours. Therefore Eros is mine, no matter which government's claim is soundest. That's Inter-galactic law."

"You seem to forget," Dick pointed out, "that we've established a permanent settlement. As travelers, you may be considered itinerant explorers with only the privileges of a study party. We will extend to you the courtesies of Eros for the legal three months, but after that time—"

"*You'll* extend to *us*!" Wilkes' face was flame-red. "Why, for a lead credit, I'd—"

"Sock 'im, Dick!" yelled Grampaw excitedly. "Don't let 'im git away with that talk! Sock 'im!"

"Nobody," rumbled a deep, pleasant voice, "is going to sock anybody." The tall, elder son of Sam Wilkes ranged himself beside his father. Bobby noted with sudden approval that the young man's bronzed forearms were corded; there was a crisp, firm set to his lips; he looked like a man who could handle himself equally well in a ball-room or a brawl. He said, "Send the women away, Mr. Moseley. I think we men can settle this matter."

MOIRA stepped forward, confronted the young redhead boldly. "And who are *you* to be giving orders to us? Maybe Martians treat their women like cattle, but Earthmen—"

"That will do, daughter," said Pop. And he nodded. "But that's not a bad idea, Wilkes. There is no reason why we should not be able to settle this question in a friendly manner. Mrs. Wilkes, if you and your daughter would accept our hospitality, I'm sure Martha can find you a cup of tea. Wilkes, if you and your son would care, to sit down with us, we can—Bobby, run and get some water for the Wilkes' horses. If they are horses?" he added dubiously.

"Gooldaks!" sniffed Junior Wilkes disdainfully. "I'll help you, Skinny. What's the matter with that sister of yours? She looks like an unbaked cookie."

"Yeah? Then why does your brother keep staring at her all the time? Come on—" Bobby strained desperately for a suitable term; culled his resources, came up triumphantly. "Come on, Stinky!"

When they had watered and fed the gooldaks, Junior wanted to see around the farm. Bobby showed him, while the other boy marveled wistfully.

"You folks struck it lucky. This is the best part of the whole planet. . . . I mean of what we've seen so far. We got here

a couple weeks before you did, and we've traveled a couple hundred miles looking for a good location. Boy, it sure was awful where we cracked up! Dad named it Little Hell, because it's so hot and sandy and terrible. No fresh water. One big hot, salt lake. Red mountains and desert land. All oxides, Red said—he's my brother. He's smart."

"So's mine," said Bobby. "Are Martians people?"

"What do you mean? Of course they're people. Same as you. Men that left Earth because there was too darn much fighting and stuff. And of course Earth tried to claim Mars as a colony, but Mars won its fight for independence."

"Earth just let 'em go free," scoffed Bobby. "They didn't want any dried-up old planet, anyhow!"

"No? Then why did they—Hey! What's that?"

"Quoits. Know how?"

"Do I! I can beat you!"

"Huh!" said Bobby. He glanced at the house, but no one was paying any attention to them. Pop and Dick were deep in conversation with the Wilkes, father and son. The two old men were aside on one corner of the porch rubbing salt in old wounds, re-fighting the battles of Mercador's Canal and High Plateau, re-surveying the campaigns that had led to Martian independence and a better understanding between the blue and red planets. Eleanor and Mom were preparing dinner; Moira had disappeared. A thin and lonely figure stood on the steps looking at Bobby and Junior. Junior called, "Hey, Ginger—come on down if you want to." She came.

Bobby said, "What did you call her for?"

"What's the matter? You 'fraid a girl can lick you playing games?"

"Huh!" said Bobby again. There was something sissy about playing games with fourteen-year-old girls. It didn't help much that Ginger, with skinny-armed, keen-eyed accuracy succeeded in beating both himself and her brother in two games of quoits and one of shuffleboard before the dinner-gong rang.

Dinner was a truculent experience. Conversation had done absolutely nothing to clarify the issue. Both parties were sincere in their conviction of ownership to

Eros. Pop based his claim on the establishment of a permanent base at Delta Port; Wilkes insisted that priority of arrival was his proof of occupancy.

"So one of us," insisted Wilkes, "has got to leave. And since *we* can't—"

"Can't?"

"Our ship crashed," explained Red Wilkes, watching Moira, "on landing. It is a total wreck."

BOBBOY thought, glumly, that Moira was a total wreck, too. He had held hopes for Moira. Since their arrival on Eros she had turned into a pretty nice guy; cheerful, willing to work, fresh-looking. Now, for some obscure reason, she had piled her hair up on top of her head, put powder on her face and red stuff on her mouth. She wore a dress instead of pants, and she was mincing and prissing around like a prize horse.

"So," continued Wilkes, "since *we* can't leave, your family must."

And Dick laughed out loud.

"Checkmate!" he said.

"What?"

"We've wasted time," said Dick, "trying to decide which family must leave. The truth is, neither of us can! Because, you see, we cracked up in landing, also. Our ship lies out there four fathoms deep in Delta Sound!" He rose. "So that's that, folks. And I'm afraid, Mr. Wilkes, that under the present circumstances, *your* family will be the one to ultimately depart from Eros."

"Ours? Why?"

"Because of the internationally recognized laws of squatters' rights. You must know the requirements a settler has to fulfill in order to establish claim to land? He must declare his purpose of settling upon leaving the parent planet—"

"We did that," said Red Wilkes, "before we left."

"I know. And four months later he will be visited by an inspection ship of the S.S.P.—"

"We know that, too."

"—upon the arrival of which," Dick continued, "he must show advancement in the following colonization projects. (a) Establishment of a power plant or unit; (b) construction of a suitable dwelling or dwellings; (c) satisfactory advancement of

natural resources, including farms, fisheries or other means of livelihood and sustenance—"

"Get to the point!" growled Wilkes.

"Immediately. And with pleasure. You see, my dear sir, as you have told us, you left Mars even *before* we left Earth. But whereas we have turned our time to good account, constructing the comforts which you now see about you, your family has squandered precious weeks wandering over the face of Eros seeking a favorable location.

"If I am not mistaken, the Solar Space Patrol's inspection is only six short weeks in the offing. And judging from our experience, you cannot possibly satisfy the requirements of the land-grant code in that short space of time. I remind you that the planting of a garden would, in itself, spell an end to your ambitions."

Sam Wilkes was on his feet, choking with rage.

"That there law is nonsense, Moseley! The land law allows us a full year to establish a settlement—"

"Ah, yes! The land law. But you forget that these are unusual circumstances. Two families with equally valid rights have claimed Eros. Land law is overruled, and the law of squatters' dominion comes into effect.

"So, I'm very sorry for you, Wilkes. But I hope we can be friendly neighbors for the short time you *remain* here with us on Eros."

WILKES was a statue of dismay. The rigidity of him melted enough to let him turn slowly to his son.

"Is—is that right, Red?"

And the younger Wilkes nodded.

"I'm afraid it is, Dad."

Sam Wilkes brought his fist down on the table. The hand-made crockery danced and trembled.

"Then, by Gad! I'll have no more of this talk or no more phoney hospitality. Bessie, Ginger, Papa—come on! We're getting out of here! We've got work to do!"

Pop said slowly, "I'm sorry, Wilkes. But—"

"Sorry! Bah!"

"And just where," cackled Grampaw, loving it, "might y' be goin'?"

"Not far. Right across the river. You can't claim all of this fertile valley—yet! And you haven't cleared that ground."

He stomped to the door; turned there for one, final warning.

"—and I advise you Moseleys to keep off our land, too! We're goin' to be mighty busy provin' our right to own this planet. I understand there's pests around these parts that are darn disturbin'; I'd hate to make a mistake and shoot any skunks by accident. Come on, Mama!"

Bessie Wilkes looked at Mom. Her worn, tired features sagged piteously. She wet her lips. "Mrs. Moseley—"

Mom said, "Rob, don't you think you're being a little harsh, maybe?"

But there was a streak of granite in Pop, too. And he was angry; white-angry as only a tried Irishman can be. He said in a cold and level voice, "I think, Mother, you should get Mrs. Wilkes' wraps."

And they left. Ginger Wilkes turned to stick out her tongue at Bobby as they got on their gooldaks and rode toward the river. And Junior made a gesture which Bobby returned in kind. But Red Wilkes didn't even look back. So there was no good reason why Moira should have suddenly burst into tears and gone to her own room. . . .

V

IT WAS DICK who brought home the bad news. Two Eros days had passed since the Wilkes took their angry departure from the Moseley home. In those two days, an unhappy atmosphere had settled down over the house at Delta Port. Moira said little or nothing, Mom just moped around the house, The Pooch got indigestion and cried interminably; even Grampaw Moseley was grumpier than usual. Bobby tried to forget the depression by playing quoits. He gave it up as a bad job. It wasn't any fun playing by yourself, and Dick and Pop were too busy to play with him. If only—

But comets to Junior Wilkes! And Ginger, too!

At dinner time, Dick came into the house slowly, a thoughtful look in his eyes. When they were seated he said, suddenly, "Have any of you seen the Wilkes lately?"

Grampaw said, "I seen Old Man Wilkes. He was pitchforkin' land down by our south forty, oney on the opposite side o' the river. Fat ol' sinner. I chucked a rock at 'im!"

Bobby looked interested.

"You hit him, Grampaw?"

"I don't never miss. In the right leg."

"I bet he hollered."

Grampaw sucked his upper plate fiercely. "Nary a holler, durn him! He jist pulled up his pants-leg and made a face at me. *De-crepit ol' fool's* got a wooden leg!"

Pop said, "Why did you ask, Richard?"

"I was wondering if any of you had noticed what I did."

"What do you mean?"

Dick started to answer, stopped, rose. "Come," he said. "It's dark. I'll show you."

They followed him out to the porch. From there the Wilkes settlement could not ordinarily be seen. Which is why, as they stood there, one and all gasped astonishment.

The thick, black Erosian night lay heavy about them everywhere except in the direction of the Wilkes' new home. There it was light; startlingly, dazzlingly, brilliantly gay and bright! Like a great white dawn on the river's edge.

"Power!" cried Pop. "Atomic power! They must have a hypatomic!"

"They never said they hadn't. They told us their space-ship cracked up; we just took it for granted that since we hadn't been able to salvage our hypatomic, neither could they."

Bobby said wonderingly, "Gee, Pop, it looks like at home, doesn't it? I forgot lights were so bright."

Pop said, "I'm afraid we've underestimated our competitors, son. If they have power, they can accomplish all we have, and more! And in one-tenth the time."

"That's just," said Dick slowly, "what I'm afraid of. There's only one answer to this challenge. I've got to get our hypatomic from the *Cuchulainn*. And quickly."

"But you said—"

"I know what I said. But I also know what they can do. In three days they can have a house . . . a fine, big, plastic house that will make our hand-hewn log cabin look like a cowshed. They'll have elec-

tricity, fuel, running water, all the things we've had to do without. When the inspectors see their house and compare it with ours—Mom—get me my bulger. I'm leaving for the north shore."

"Tonight, Richard?"

"Immediately."

Pop said, "And Bobby and I will go with you."

THEY were there before morning. The shore looked much as Bobby remembered it, except that now there was a raft there; the craft which Dick had used to float out to the sunken ship on previous visits. The three of them boarded this, paddled out to the bobbing buoy that marked the *Cuchulainn's* watery resting-place.

Dick donned his bulger, weighted his boots, and went below. The sun rose higher in the east. After a while, green wavelets rolled and Dick was up again.

"It's no use, Pop. It's like I said. The ship has continued to settle; the airlock is jammed tight against the bottom. I can't get in any more."

Pop said, "And I suppose there's no way to attach a drag to the ship, work it loose?"

"It would take more power than we have." Gloomily.

And then Bobby remembered, suddenly. He said, "Hey, Dick—!"

"Never mind, kid. Help me off with this suit."

"But listen, Dick. I read a story once—"

"Do what your brother asks, Robert."

"Will you let me finish, Pop? Listen, Dick, in this story a rocketeer got locked out of his spaceship. So he unfastened the stern-braces and got in through the rocket jet!"

"He . . . did . . . what?"

"Unfastened the stern-braces—"

"I heard you!" Dick's face had suddenly lighted. "Great day in the morning, Pop—I bet it'll work! Hand me that jack-wrench . . . that's the one! So long!"

And he was under water again. This time he stayed under for more than an hour. He bobbed up, finally, while Pop and Bobby were having sandwiches. Pop said, "How's it going, Richard?"

"Give me a fresh capsule," demanded Dick. He took the oxy-tainer, replenished

his supply pack, disappeared. A long time passed. Too long a time. Bobby began to feel apprehensive. He didn't say anything, though, because he knew Pop was feeling the same way. And then—

"There he is!" said Pop. And sure enough, Dick was coming up out of the water slowly. Terribly slowly. Bobby saw why. It was because he was weighted by a square box held in his arms. A familiar square box. The hypatomic motor of the *Cuchulainn*!

"Got it!" gasped Dick. "Easy, now . . . it's heavy. I hope it'll work. It's been under water so doggoned long—"

Joyfully, they lugged it all the way back to Delta Port. It was sleep-time when they got there, but they were too excited to sleep. By fire- and candle-light, Dick worked on the salvaged power unit, patching, wiring, repairing. And at dawn he had it hooked up. He raised his head gleefully.

"Get ready, folks! Here's the blow that smashes the hopes of the Wilkes clan. Behold—*light!*"

And he closed a switch. There was a throbbing hum, a glow, a moment of bright, joyous, welcome light. Then an angry growl from deep in the bowels of the atomic box. And a sudden, blinding flash of blue light—

Darkness! And from the darkness, Pop's voice.

"Ruined! It was under water too long, son. Too long!"

"Too long," echoed Dick dolefully.

IT WAS Grampaw Moseley who revived their dejected spirits. When they had rested, he came to them, pounding his cane on the floor, snarling at them with unexpected vigor.

"You young uns gimme a pain! Robert, I'm ashamed o' ye. An' you, too, Dicky-boy! Actin' like we was licked just because a silly-lookin' little old box won't act up right.

"We was gettin' along fine here without no atomic motor, wasn't we? Buildin' a friendly, comf'table community? Well, why can't we go on livin' like we was? We'll solve the heat an' light problem some other way, that 's all!"

Pop said, "I know, Father. But in

time? After all, when the inspectors come—"

"Inspectors my foot! They's one thing we got that the dad-blamed Wilkses can't git with all their heat an' free power an' hot-an'-cold runnin' water, ain't they?"

"Wh-what's that?"

"Vittles! One o' the requirements is the settler's got to git him a garden grow-in', ain't it? Well, we got one. An' the Wilkses ain't. An', dag-nab it, they ain't goin' to grow wheat an' tomatays an' butter-beans out of a metal box! So stop belly-achin' and git back to work, the two of ye!"

His words were harsh, but the bitter medicine cured the ill. There was truth in what he said. So, putting behind them all dreams of motorized accomplishment, the Moseley family once more returned to the task of making complete and comfortable their home at Delta Port.

Dick tackled once more the problem of running water for their home. This time he solved it with the aid of Grampaw's capable cooperage. A huge tank, set into the eaves, stored the water. A hand-pump drew it from the stream. An old, hollow brass doorknob, pierced with drill-holes, secured to the end of the 'fresher pipe, made an excellent spray for the shower.

Grampaw worked his farm ferociously; Mom and Eleanor and Moira spent hours in the kitchen, jarring and preserving the produce he was now harvesting. Bobby's chores piled up till it seemed he had scarcely any time left for playing. He was enjoying himself, though. It was fun feeling that his efforts were helping toward putting the Wilkes where they belonged.

Moira seemed to be thriving on this pioneer life, too. She had developed a sudden love for the country; even after a hard day's work she would set out, almost every evening, for a tramp about the countryside. She didn't show very good sense about it, though, for like as not she'd go out all be-doodled up in a dress and high-heeled shoes, and come back flushed and excited and hardly caring that she was ruining her best clothes.

Once Bobby decided to go walking with her, but she slipped away before he could announce his intention. He lost her down by the river-bank, and since an hour of

sun and dusk remained, decided to go swimming. He had been in the water but a few minutes when the brush parted and there was Junior Wilkes.

"Hello," said Junior.

"Hello, yourself," said Bobby.

Junior said, "I'm looking for Red."

"Well, he's not here." Bobby continued paddling. The brush crackled and he thought Stinky had gone. He looked up, suddenly feeling loneliness close in upon him. But the other boy was still there. He was hesitantly fumbling at his shirt-buttons. Bobby said, "You can come in if you want to. I guess this river don't belong to nobody."

THEY swam together for quite a while, neither wanting to break the silence. It would be, thought Bobby vaguely, an act of disloyalty. To Pop and Dick and the family. Of course, if Junior spoke first. . . .

When they were dressing, each on his own side of the river, Junior spoke. He said, "You ever play quoits any more?"

"All the time," said Bobby airily. He hadn't laid a hand on the quoits since that afternoon. "We have a lot of fun," he said.

"Well, so do we," said Junior. He added, "Anyway, I can have your quoits' run after you leave Eros. My Dad said so."

"Don't hold your breath waiting," snorted Bobby. "I guess I'll be living in your big house after you go away."

"It's a nicer house than yours!"

"Did I say it wasn't?" Bobby had seen it. It was a beauty. But why not, with the limitless power of an atomic machine to supply the labor of creating plastic, operate the lifts and perform all the hard manual labor? "You ought to see our garden, though. We've got corn and beans and all sorts of things."

"No kidding?" Junior looked hungry. But he shook his head. "Synthos suit me *exactly!* I'd rather eat them than any home-grown stuff."

"I bet!" scoffed Bobby. He had finished dressing. He turned awkwardly. "Well—see you!" he said.

"Tomorrow night," said Junior. And, shucks, that was a date. He couldn't break it, after that, even if he had only

been being polite. And it sort of got to be a habit to swim together for a little while every evening. He didn't tell Pop because Pop would be mad. And Junior didn't tell his old man, because he knew he'd get whaled. . . .

AND THE weeks raced by on eager feet. Until one day, shortly after breakfast, Bobby went out to see how clear the weather was, so he could go fishing; looked heavenward—and came racing back into the house.

"Pop!" he yelled. "Dick! A ship! I think it's the Patrol ship. Coming here!"

They came running. And it was the Patrol ship. It circled high above them like a giant eagle, then, with a flat, flooding thunder of jet-fire, dropped to rest in a field between the properties of the two feuding clans.

VI

THE COMMANDER of the Patrolship *Sirius* was Lt.-Col. Travers, third ranking officer of the Belt Fleet. He shook Pop's hand heartily.

"Glad to meet you, Dr. Moseley. I've heard so much about you, I feel as if I already know you. My nephew was a student in several of your classes at Midland U. He said you were a very capable instructor . . . and if I may judge from what we noted from above, I might add that you are an extremely capable colonist as well as professor."

Pop wriggled. "Why—why, thank you, Colonel."

"This fine farmland," smiled the space officer, "and that artesian well I see across the river . . . these silos, and your magnificent dwelling. . . ."

Pop hrrumphed, even more embarrassed.

"Colonel," he faltered, "I think I'd better explain immediately that all is not mine. There are two groups of claimants to this planetoid. Ourselves and a family named Wilkes. Martians. Our property is here; theirs is across the river. I—uh—here comes Wilkes now."

Travers' brow furrowed.

"Indeed? Then he was right, after all!"

"He? Who?"

The question was answered by the ap-

pearance of a man in drill space-gear who stepped from the *Sirius*. A lean and capable-appearing man, hard-bitten of feature, shrewd of eye and tight of lip. Colonel Travers said, "Dr. Moseley, permit me to introduce Mr. Wade, survey scout of the United Ores Corporation."

Wade acknowledged the introduction with a crisp nod. Then, "What's this about there being two claimants to Eros?" He turned to the ship's commander. "This makes a difference, doesn't it, Colonel? My information was correct. Therefore it becomes your duty to make a final, exhaustive study of the settlers' accomplishments right *now*. And in the event their projects have not been completed in accordance with the provisions of the Squatter's Rights Code, Section 103A, Paragraphs vii to xix, inclusive—"

Eleanor whispered nervously, "What does he mean, Dick? What is he talking about?" and Dick nodded tightly. "I think I know." He stepped forward. "I take it, Mr. Wade, that the U.O.C. has filed a claim on the possession of Eros in the event that our settlement projects should not satisfy the inspector's requirements?"

"Quite right, young man. And I might add—" Wade was openly hostile. "I might add that I have obtained permission to accompany Colonel Travers on his inspection tour. In order to verify his findings. If I am not satisfied—"

"That will do, Mr. Wade!" Colonel Travers was under orders to treat his passenger as a guest; there was no obligation that he like the ore scout. The glint in his eye, the set of his jaw, indicated the direction in which his sympathy lay. "I am quite capable of handling this. Ah—Good day, sir! Mr. Wilkes, I presume?"

"Howdy, Skipper. Yeah, I'm Sam Wilkes." The rival settler glanced around swiftly, sensed the overtones of enmity, glared at Pop suspiciously. "What's wrong here? Has Moseley been squawkin' about—?"

"Dr. Moseley informed us that you and he were both claimants to Eros. Therefore I shall immediately visit your two establishments in order to determine which, if either of you, has the better justified his claim.

"Lieutenant Thrainell, you will serve as

my aide. We will first inspect Dr. Moseley's habitation."

THUS it began. Pop took the two Patrolmen and the civilian critic to Delta Port, pointed out with pride the many things accomplished within the past months. He met, in Col. Travers, an admiring audience. The commander was outspokenly delighted with what he saw. "Gad, man! You did all this without power? This is the pioneering feat of the decade! Look, Lieutenant! Running water . . . chinaware . . . that furniture! Marvelous! You deserve a wealth of credit, Doctor."

"But," pointed out Wade caustically, "you mentioned the biggest fault yourself."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Wade?"

"Without power!" snapped Wade. "Moseley, where are your lights? Where's your power plant? How about heat? And this cooking equipment — it's aboriginal!"

Pop said stiffly, "We have no hypatomic, sir. But you will notice that we have devised satisfactory substitutes for power-driven gear. Hand-pumps draw our water, light is supplied by these oil-float lamps, our house is centrally heated by these open fire-places. We are—" He faltered. "We shall, of course, order a complete hypatomic unit from Earth, install it as soon as possible."

"I'm afraid that's not quick enough," sneered Wade. "Colonel Travers will undoubtedly remember the requirements of the law in that respect. 'Claimant must display, at time of inspection, a power-plant of atomic, motor, or hydraulic drive capable of generating a minimum of 3,000 Legerling units *per diem*, and so arranged as to provide dwellings and other structures with heat, light and power.' You have no such equipment, have you, Dr. Moseley?"

"No, but—"

"You have not, then?"

"No."

"Very well, then." Wade smiled thinly, closed the black book in which he had been jotting notes with a plushy sound of finality. "May I suggest, Colonel, that we see the *other* claimant's plantation?"

After they had left, Colonel Travers

shaking his head regretfully at Pop as if to say he was sorry but helpless before the arguments of this interloper, Pop sat down and propped his chin on his fists. Yesterday he had looked like a man of thirty; all of sudden he looked old and weary and discouraged. He said, "Well, there it is, Martha. I've dreamed my dream, and now it's over, and I've failed."

"No you haven't Rob. The Colonel is on our side. He's a good man. He'll—"

"But the law is on Wade's side. If our claim is outlawed, Eros will become a dirty, smoky mining camp. This soft beauty, these green rolling hills, will echo with the clatter of blasters. Unless—"

And suddenly he was again a man of action. He came to his feet suddenly.

"Martha, Eleanor, Dick—everybody! Get those preserves out of the storage closet. Grampaw, get the hauler from the shed. Bobby, you run and tell Sam Wilkes to keep those inspectors out of his house for a half hour or so."

"Why, Pop?" demanded Dick. "What are you going to do?"

"Do? I'm going to see that Sam Wilkes gets this planet, that's what! Oh, I know—there won't be any question of his sharing it with me. He's too hard and stiff-necked a man for that. But he's our kind of man, with all his faults. A pioneer with the daring to come to a new world and try to build it into a home of his own."

"We've known for weeks that all he needed to justify his claim was a food supply. Well, by thunder, we've got a food supply! And we'll give it to him, lock, stock and barrel, to keep Eros out of the Corporation's hands! Now, step, everybody! Moira! Moira—where is that girl?"

"She stayed down by the river, Pop."

"Well, find her. Bobby, go tell Sam Wilkes what I just said!"

Bobby scooted.

HE WAS soaking wet when he got to the Wilkes' house. That was because he took the short-cut, which meant plunging right into the river and swimming across, clothes and all. The inspectors and their snoopy companion would have to take the long route, around the ford.

Mr. Wilkes wasn't in the house when he got there. But Mrs. Wilkes was, and Ginger, and both gasped as they saw him. Mrs. Wilkes bustled forward.

"Sweet stars above, child, what are you doing here? Get those clothes off; you'll catch your death of cold. Ginger—go get one of Junior's suits—"

Bobby said, "There's no time for that, Mrs. Wilkes. Where's Fat Sa—I mean, where's your husband?"

Ginger said, "Don't tell him, Ma. He's just here to crow because he knows we can't pass the inspection requirements—"

"You—you shut up!" bellowed Bobby. "You doggone female! You don't know anything about it. Mrs. Wilkes, get your husband. Mom and Sis and the rest will be here any minute now. They're—"

And he explained. His explanation sent them into a flurry of excitement; there was even deeper excitement when Sam Wilkes, hastily summoned, heard the same story repeated. For once the leathery corners of his mouth relaxed into something like a grin. He swore, and slammed a big hand on his knee.

"You're old man is going to do that for us, sonny? Well, hornswoggle my jets! And to think I—Junior, go find Red. Hop it!"

"Red's not around, Pa. He went toward the river."

"Confound him! Just when we need him most. Well—I'll go meet the confounded rascals, stall them as long as I can. And look here, you—what's your name?"

"Bobby."

"I won't forget this, Bobby! Not by a jugfull. If I hadn't been such a stubborn, pigheaded old hound, I'd have dickered with your Pa long afore this. There's plenty of room on Eros for two families. Or two dozen!"

Then followed a half hour of labor so swift that it made all the accomplishments of the past months seem snail-like by comparison. Mom and Eleanor arrived, bearing armloads of canned goods and preserves; Grampaw and Dick brought the hauler across the river on a raft, and piled high on the hauler were fresh vegetables that gorged the never-used Wilkes containers to repletion. It was fast work, but efficient. And when, about three-

quarters of an Earth hour later, Wilkes came from the lower acreage accompanied by the two officers and the Corporation investigator, the job was finished, and a tired but glowing two-family group awaited him.

Colonel Travers' inspection of the food-supply was perfunctory. It needed not be otherwise. One glance sufficed to show that there was in the Wilkes household enough food to nourish a dozen families for as many months.

And there was a smile of grim satisfaction on his lips as, turning to his aide, he said, "Very well, Lieutenant. You may make a notation that the Wilkes household has been inspected and found satisfactory in all respects." He looked at Wade purposefully and repeated in a firm tone. "In *all* respects!"

AH, HE WAS no dummy, that Colonel. Bobby had seen the twinkle in his eye as he glanced into the preserve closet. Because, shucks! there wasn't any mistaking Mom's way of doing up preserves. With little red bands around each jar, and her firm, crabbed handwriting telling what was inside.

"In all respects!" he said again. And reached for Sam Wilkes' pudgy paw. "Congratulations, Sir! You've earned possession of the planetoid Eros. Your power-plant is among the finest it has ever been my pleasure to view; you have undeniably cleared and planted the required number of acres, your food supply is well above the minimum requirements—"

"But see here!" Wade's face was an ugly red. "I'm not satisfied, Colonel. There's something fishy about this. The farmlands we inspected were barely out of the seed stage. The corn was only knee high, the vegetables mere sprouts. These people couldn't have raised all this produce—"

Sam Wilkes spluttered helplessly, "Why I—I—"

And Pop came to his rescue. Smoothly. Suavely.

"But he did, Mr. Wade. On the farmlands across the river. Those are the early crops; the ones you've just seen are the late harvest."

"But—but you claimed those were *your* crops!"

"Did I?" Pop stroked his chin thoughtfully. "Well, maybe I was bragging a little. You see, I've been working for Mr. Wilkes. A sort of share-cropper, you might say."

"Now I get it!" howled the angry scout. "I thought so. It's skullduggery, that's what it is! Don't you see, Colonel? These men are conspiring to defraud us. To cheat the Corporation. Moseley had deliberately given his crops and food-supply to Wilkes—"

There was again a twinkle in the Colonel's eye. He said, soberly, "And suppose you're right, Wade? What then? There's no law against a man giving away his possessions to another man, is there?"

"As an inspector for the Solar Space Patrol, my only interest is in seeing that a settler's domain fulfills the requirements of the Squatter's Rights Code. Mr. Wilkes has fulfilled those requirements. I am not interested in the how or why. Therefore, under the power invested in me by the Triune Planetary Government, I hereby decide and award—"

And then a crafty brilliance illumined Wade's eyes.

"Stop!" he cried.

Colonel Travers hesitated. "Pardon, Mr. Wade?"

"Since you are such a stickler for duty, Colonel, I wish to call to your attention a further stipulation of the Squatter's Rights Code. One you have evidently forgotten. The Code says, Section 115B, Paragraph iii, 'Such requirements having been fulfilled, it shall be lawful to award the settled property to any family group comprised of at least six adults who pledge intention to make the property their permanent home—'"

Sam Wilkes said, "Well, what's the matter. Don't we intend to make Eros our permanent home?"

"I have no doubt of it, Mr. Wilkes. But I regret to inform you that you will not be able to do so, since you do not fulfill this last-mentioned paragraph."

"There's six of us!" defended Wilkes stoutly.

"But the law," insisted Wade, "requires *six adults*! May I ask, Mr. Wilkes, how many of your family are more than twenty-one years of age!"

DICK whistled softly. Pop's jaw dropped. Wilkes' face turned crimson. And Bobby computed hastily. This was the final, devastating blow. The Wilkes household contained only four adults; Old Man Wilkes, Sam and his wife, and Red. Junior and Ginger were just kids.

With sudden regret, Bobby realized that they should have arranged their conspiracy in reverse. There were six adults in the Moseley clan, Moira having just celebrated her twenty-first birthday. But it was too late for that now. As friendly as Colonel Travers was, he could not openly countenance a flagrant, deliberate transference of all property to the Moseleys.

So their last, desperate ruse had failed. And now none of them would win ownership of Eros. All their lovely hopes and dreams had been in vain; their new-found friendship with the Wilkes a dying gesture. . . .

Wade could not restrain himself from elaborating on the situation.

"So, my friends," he chuckled, "your deceit wins its proper reward. Under the circumstances, I shall not do what I had earlier planned on doing. I was going to give each of you, with the Corporation's compliments, a fitting reward for having so diligently opened up this new colony. Now I see no reason for so doing.

"In the future, it might be well to remember the law provides many loopholes to the ingenious man. That is a hard lesson, but a fair one. Were you but six adults—"

And then there was a sudden stir at the doorway. A deep, rumbling, familiar voice. That of Red Wilkes.

"You crow mighty loud for a bantam rooster, Mister!" he said. "But you're crowing at a false dawn. Because it so happens that we are six adults. As a matter of fact, we're more than six adults. There are *ten* of us!"

Wade spun, shocked. The others looked, too, and in all eyes there was surprise. All, that is, but Ginger. She was hugging her knees, rocking back and forth comfortably, looking very much pleased with herself and with the world in general. She said, "I knew it. I knew it all the time."

"Knew what?" said Bobby, but his ques-

tion was lost in Wade's irate demand.

"Ten of you? What are you talking about? Who is this young whipper-snapper?"

"That," said Sam Wilkes conversationally, "is my son. And I'd be careful if I was you, Mister. The last guy who called him names is still pickin' up teeth. Son, I reckon you know what the hell you're talkin' about. But the rest of us don't. So if you'd please explain—?"

RED WILKES grinned. He said, "Moira, honey." And Moira entered from the porch. There was a smile on her face and somehow there was a smile in her eyes, too, and Bobby got the strange feeling that if you could see inside her, there'd be a smile in her heart. She looked at Mom, and Mom gave a little gasp, like she could tell just by looking at Moira what Moira meant. Red Wilkes continued to grin. He said, "Colonel, commanders of space vessels have the privilege of marrying folks, haven't they?"

"Why—why, yes," said Travers.

"Then," said Red mildly, "how'd you like to get out the little black book and start tying knots? Because, you see, Moira has told me she's willing to take a chance."

Pop said, "Moira, darling, you're not just doing this because . . . because . . ."

"No, Pop. I'm doing it because I want to. Because I love Red and he loves me. It's been that way since the day we met. We—we've been meeting secretly for the past six weeks. We meant to break the news sooner or later. And now seems to be about the best time."

"Particularly," pointed out the groom-to-be, "since our marriage turns two families into *one* family. And I think that will spike your guns, Mr. Wade?"

Wade was no longer crimson. He was purple. "You can't do this, Colonel!" he screamed. "It's illegal. Anyway, they won't be truly related. The two families will just be in-laws—"

But there was an open, admiring grin on the lips of Lieutenant-Colonel Travers, S.S.P. He said, "Maybe I *can't* do it, Mr. Wade—but by the Pleiades, I'm going to! And as for the law—according to all decisions I've ever read, in-laws are valid relatives. You're the one who was yelping

about the law providing many loopholes for ingenious men. Well, here's a big, juicy loophole. How do you like it?"

Wade, howled, "I protest! It's unfair! I refuse to allow—"

Red Wilkes looked at his father hopelessly. "Shall I, Pop?" he asked.

And Sam Wilkes shook his head. "No, son. It ain't fittin'. Not on your wedding day."

Which gave Dick an idea. He rose, grimly.

"It's not *my* wedding day!" he said. "Wade—"

But somehow Mr. Wade had vanished. Toward the ship.

AFTERWARD, Colonel Travers lingered to shake hands all around.

"I commend you both," he said, "for the fine spirit you have shown; the fine work you've done in making Eros a member of the Solar family. You prove what I have always claimed—that the pioneer spirit in Man is not dead, nor will it ever die so long as there remain new frontiers to conquer.

"Well, I must go now. But I'll stop back by here on my next swing around the Belt. Perhaps a year from now, perhaps a little less. I'll bring the things you ask for. A new motor, some cloth, silverware—I have your list."

"Don't forget the books, said Pop.

"I won't." The Captain made a note. "And the seeds." That was Old Man Wilkes.

"No. I'll bring them."

"And bring," said Moira, "a teething ring."

Eleanor said, "Oh, nonsense, Moira! In another year The Pooch will be too old for teething rings."

"Bring," said Moira doggedly, "a teething ring." And blushed.

Bobby blushed, too. It was, he thought, indecent of Moira to be so brazen. And her only married! Golly, did she have to look so far ahead? And, anyway, with Ginger standing right there. . . .

He said, "Hey, Stinky, how about a game of quoits?"

"Suits," said Junior.

And Ginger said, "Me, too." She put her hand in Bobby's. She said, with alarming frankness, "I like you! Maybe I'll let you be my beau."

Bobby shook loose. He said, "Aw, you darn girls—"

But she had her way. She played quoits with him and Junior. And she won. Which may have been symbolic, though it didn't occur to Bobby that way. Maybe she would always have her way. And maybe she would always win—whatever she wanted.

Yet for a while there would be peace on Eros. . . .

YOU BUY WAR BONDS

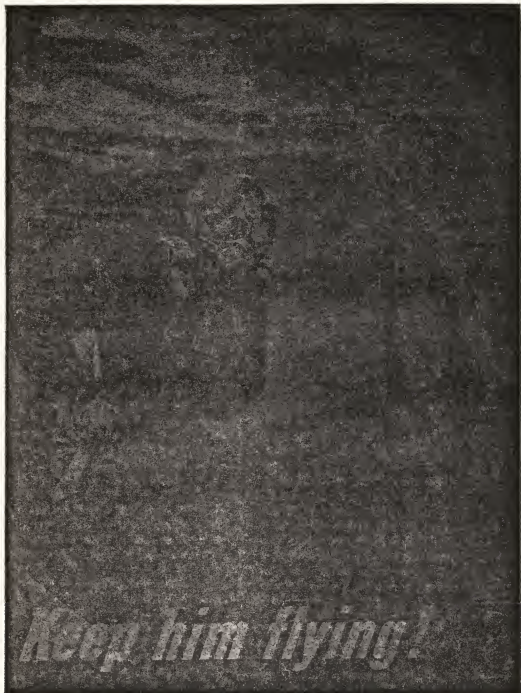
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WORKERS KEEP THE SOLDIERS FIGHTING

THE SOLDIERS FIGHT FOR YOUR FREEDOM

YOU GET FOUR BUCKS FOR EVERY THREE YOU PAY

HOW CAN YOU LOSE?



Keep him flying!

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BUY WAR BONDS



Space was a raving hell of raw energy.

THE STAR GUARDSMAN

By ALBERT DePINA

Europa was the only sanctuary for Earth's doomed millions. Yet to hold it, Mark Lynn had to fight his traitorous Overlords. And he was destined to lose—for his weapons were antiquated, his allies a fragile peaceful race.

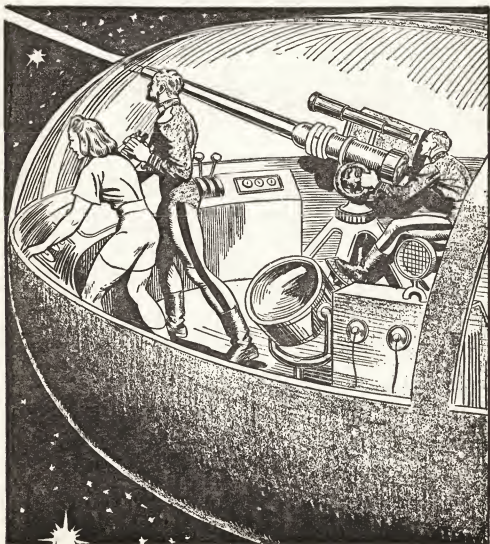
“YOUR BUSINESS?”

The Martian Proctor's parchment-like face was blank as he examined Lynn's pass-card impassively.

“Since when are Internationals given explanations?” Mark Lynn's dark green eyes glowed. “I've been given none.”

“In the Council Hall, humility's essential.” The tall Martian drew himself erect, arrogantly.

“See that you observe it, then.” Lynn barked laconically and turning entered the tube, while the violet-eyed Planetarian gasped in incredulity.



When the door of the tube in which he'd been transported opened silently, Mark Lynn found himself before a blank, polished wall of Beryloy, but as he stepped before it, the wall slid aside to reveal an austere room of dura-plon whose walls were buckled in places, as if they'd endured tremendous pressure; part of the room was marked off by beryloy cables, where a *bas-relief* of man's progress had crumbled to the floor and had not been removed as yet. The ceiling seemed uneven, the polished expanse of floor was asymmetrical.

Across an enormous desk, now covered by a plotting chart, a figure dressed in the purple uniform of a scientist, with the golden cord of the Psychologists, gazed at him placidly out of level hazel eyes. The short-cropped hair that escaped the confines of the tight, silver kepis, was golden-brown, unruly, and the oval face freckle-sprinkled had the serious expression of a precocious child.

MARK regarded the girl gravely, startled at her youth, although being accustomed to female scientists her sex did not surprise him. He remained silent, as the etiquette of 2,022 demanded when before the ruling class.

"You've made a characteristic beginning, Spacer Lynn," the girl observed coldly and gestured toward a visi-screen at her side. "Was it necessary to leave the Proctor frothing?"

"At the moment, yes!" Mark replied evenly. "Martian arrogance annoys me, scientist."

The girl frowned slightly. "I'm Doctor Fortun," she stated after a pause. "The Council has decided to honor you with a mission. It is a problem particularly suited to your . . . er . . . talents; your record shows a rare agility of mind impossible to find among Civicans."

"That's because controls one, six and fifteen failed to affect me," Mark said smiling, unconsciously displaying magnificent teeth, dazzling against the background of his space-tanned features.

"Because you're a . . ." the girl began irritably and then checked herself. "No matter, Spacer Lynn."

"Why not finish it?" Mark sat down, stretching long, sinewy legs until he sprawled relaxed and loose-jointed, so that it seemed even his magnificent muscles would never be able to lift the great body. "Atavistic, is the word." He grinned engagingly and hooded his eyes slightly as he appraised Doctor Fortun with undisguised admiration.

The young scientist reddened, but she continued in a quiet voice.

"You were selected because you evolved the expedient of taking Internationals on space exploration, in defiance of the Council Law that no International can serve more than two years in one position, by simply shifting them to different levels of work on the Spacers, where they would be unlikely to contact each other, and, incidentally, managed to keep yourself as a Spacer long after your term had expired.

"Your record shows also that you circumvented the non-voting status of Internationals by organizing Civicans into groups to vote for the interests of Internationals in exchange for confidential information on planetary resettlement, so that they could obtain choice localities. . . ."

"There a fundamental necessity of calling worn-out laws to the attention of the Council by evasion, when they refuse to listen," Mark explained affably.

Doctor Fortun straightened angrily, her hazel eyes gold-bright with annoyance. "You were not summoned to discuss revision of existing laws," she flashed. "That impudence of yours hardly becomes. . . ." She was at a loss for words. Belonging as she did to the highest hereditary rank in the realm, the smiling assurance of Spacer Lynn, three ranks beneath her, and his frank insolence was a new experience to the girl.

Mark Lynn laughed joyously. The admiration in his eyes deepened.

"Thank the eternal stars!" He exclaimed.

"Have you gone mad?" The girl's voice was tight with fury. "Dare you laugh at a scientist?"

"Not, not mad—merely happy! First the Council calls me because being *International* and beyond Civican control my individualism and my freedom of action

are useful; you, of course, approve. Then when I show those very qualities, you're furious. And, I'm happy because . . ." his voice dwindled.

"Yes, go on!" Her words were sheathed in velvet, but her eyes were feral, like flaming topaz.

"Because it's paradoxical and shows you're still a woman—lovelier than any I've ever seen," he finished almost in a whisper.

DOCTOR FORTUN looked as if she were about to slap his face. Remembering the dignity of a scientist in time, she gazed at Mark Lynn with a mixture of feelings. Finally, something of his infectious good-nature, of his open admiration touched her and she laughed quietly.

"You are right, Spacer Lynn," she acknowledged. "For a moment I forgot I was a Psychologist—it's a quality about you that for an instant made me feel less a scientist and more a . . . but never mind. We'll be together for the Deity knows how long, and it's futile to begin by quarrelling. Lean forward so you can see this chart, I'll explain."

"We'll be together, did you say?" Mark was delighted. "Then give me a dozen problems!"

"Yes," she replied dubiously. "As a Psychologist I'll be part of the expedition. You'll find that this one problem will be more than enough." The girl pressed a button on her desk and one of the undamaged walls began to glow until it became an astro-map, a reproduction of charted space. Each planet was indicated in relative size, and in the lower center, pulsing angrily a thin red line marked "Comet" seemed to be approaching inferior conjunction with Terra.

"Is that the problem?" Mark asked. "Simple! When it enters Terra's orbit, life on Terra ceases. Evacuation's the only possible solution. I knew that comet was approaching, but not being an Astronomer I didn't compute its trajectory. Besides, being on Io is like being in exile—news hardly ever reaches us there. Will it destroy Terra completely?"

"No, not entirely. At first, indications were that it would enter the orbit of our system at such an angle that Terra would

be destroyed. However, we've checked with the observatories on Pluto since then, and it has been determined that it will merely enter the field of attraction sufficiently to shift the axis to opposition. Of course, this will render Terra unfit for habitation . . . perhaps for a century or two . . . therefore, as you realized, evacuation's the answer."

"I'm listening," Mark said earnestly, as the magnitude of the problem before them struck him. However, you're aware I'm not an astronomer, and the technique of evacuation could best be handled by the Council itself. I'm afraid I still don't quite see what my role's to be. . . . But whatever it is, I'm ready."

"Turn your attention to this plotting chart," Doctor Fortun indicated the map on her desk. "These areas marked in red have already been affected. Tremors have increased and volcanic openings are occurring in these and these areas, never dangerous before. While you were on Io awaiting orders for another exploratory journey, we began to attempt resettlement of our *Civilians* and *Ruralians* on other Planets—even giving them their choice of occupations and of planets. . . . quite a concession you must agree."

"Quite!" The irony in his voice seemed to escape her.

"WE HAVE succeeded in resettling two-thirds of Terra's population on Mars and Venus, and a limited number on Mercury; this last world only offered limited space at best in its twilight zone, and it was necessary to construct subterranean cities beneath its dark side—the frigid half—but that's another problem. Now, however, Venus refuses to accept any more Terrans and Mars has also closed its doors to us. Under existing treaties they have no right to exclude Terrans, but we're hardly in a position to enforce them now."

"Hardly!" Lynn agreed sardonically.

"The problem's further complicated by the innate characteristics of this remaining third," Doctor Fortun paused, and gazed very intently into the dark green eyes of the Spacer before she resumed.

"They're for the most part internationals, ruralians who originally refused to undergo controls one and six, and were

not condemned to Power Reserve because of the increasing need for Vitaminic Flora, as you no doubt know that vibroponics, due to some peculiarity of the radiations are greatly deficient in certain vitamins. The balance are Planetarians from throughout the system who flatly refuse to be repatriated. And, last but certainly not least, religious and philosophic groups—the former, fanatical believers in *ancestrals* and atavistic cults, who chose to regard this cosmic tragedy as a manifestation of Divine Wrath and devote their time to frenzied, masochistic meetings and revivals. The latter have turned stoic, and choose to see nothing in our civilization worth living for, claiming that all incentive has been removed, consequently, they prefer to meet their fate on Terra. In short, this last third is completely intractable.”

“I’m amazed the Council’s taken no measures!” Mark exclaimed.

“Oh, measures have been taken, of course. The philosophers have had rank and prerogatives—even when they had scientific honors—nullified. The religious groups have had their food allowance reduced to the starvation point and all their privileges recalled. The Internationals . . .” here she paused again as she regarded Mark, “since they’re free-thinkers, and the most dangerous of the lot, were ordered to report for control-treatment under penalty of death. They promptly took to the fastnesses in the mountains and deserts by the millions, and are existing on game and vegetables to be found in the now abandoned regions. They are armed for the most part.”

Mark Lynn was openly grinning now, but the girl chose to ignore it and continued:

“Unfortunately, our armed forces are too busy keeping order in the new resettlements, or they would have been subdued long ago. The resettlements have been supplied with seed, tools, cattle, metallic substances, concentrated fuel, machinery . . . in fact, everything necessary for a successful evacuation. This last group would have been similarly supplied, they were even given a reprieve for their insubordination and offered special terms—the Council can be munificent!” For an instant her voice rang with exaltation.

“But they absolutely refuse evacuation, except. . . .”

“Except what?” Lynn was all attention, sensing that this was the core of the problem.

“Except on their own terms!” The young scientist exclaimed with a trace of bitterness.

“But why don’t you permit them to decide what manner of death they’re to have? What possible interest can the Council have in what to them is an atavistic, intransigent group that detests our system of planned existence? If the prospect of a continuation of this civilization gags them, even in another planet, then obviously their choice to remain and die here should be respected.” Mark’s voice was very soft.

The limpid hazel eyes of the girl mirrored her shock at Mark’s words.

“Impossible! It would be horribly wasteful. And, a distinct failure on the Council’s part. Those lives can be useful—the Council never fails!”

“Amen!” Mark Lynn exclaimed archaically. “And where do I come in?”

The irony of his present situation didn’t escape him. That he, an *International*, a strata of the highly complex social order considered most dangerous, should be called in to solve a problem of such magnitude, involving (of all people) Internationals and intransigents, would have been fantastic to anyone not acquainted with the subtle and at times Machiavellian methods of the Council.

DOCTOR FORTUN handed him a rolled, tissue-thin, metallic cylinder for an answer.

“Those are your orders from the Council,” she said soberly. “I’m but an agent, as you know. Just one among the scientists who will be in charge upon arrival. Do not read it now. It is final. Take this card, it’s a permit to enter a scientific News-Casting Booth and scan all available data for the past year. We know that out of the remaining third, roughly three or four hundred million at best will be transportable. The balance are far too old to withstand the journey—their power potential is negligible, and in any case, they’d much rather die than leave. But it’s the three or four hundred million transportables who are highly useful for the

particular purpose of the Council, that we must . . . or rather," she smiled faintly, "you must convince." She opened a drawer and extracted a gleaming metal disk. "These credits will be ample," she said, extending it to Mark.

Lynn's eyes widened. "Ten thousand credits? I've had to work as many years for that amount!"

"Doctor Fortun smiled. "May you live to spend them, Spacer Lynn," she said cryptically. "Greetings!"

Mark Lynn wanted to speak, to ask her social name, anything that would delay his departure from her office. But he knew the interview was at an end even before she turned to the mass of figures and data on her desk.

Spacer Lynn threw a rapid glance around the room. They were still alone, but he knew that the entire interview had been minutely recorded—the august body of scientists of the first order who composed the Council took no chances, especially with Internationals, the adventurers, the pioneers who opened up new worlds for the maddeningly impersonal efficiency of the Council to take over and remold. But Mark didn't care. There was little that they didn't know about him, in detail.

Mark Lynn in common with a few million others was a product of his time and station. One of the immense legion of war orphans that the constant and increasingly destructive warfare of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries had left behind, he was automatically a ward of the Executive Council.

Now that wars had finally been abolished as wasteful and inefficient, the ultimate goal of the social order was "Achievement." It had become a religion. It was instilled into infantile minds with the first toddling steps; it was propagated through a thousand subtle means; it was a constant threat in the background of every living being under the government of Terra. *Achievement* was the inexorable law. It might mean producing so many tons of vitaminic flora during a span of so many years, or perhaps the production of metallic substances, or the exploration of so many worlds, as in Mark's case. Regardless of the task imposed, its final, successful and unequivocal completion was the "Achievement" for that particular be-

ing. And, woe unto him who *failed* to achieve!

In Mark Lynn's case, having been given over to the International Police for training as an astrogator and having finished his course with brilliant honors, he had been given a first-class exploration rating, and trained in outer space navigation. Years of successful interplanetary and outer space exploration and research had given him an unequaled experience as an explorer. It was his duty to give the Council implicit obedience—and to reserve his thinking for the problems of unexplored worlds and outer space. The Council, Rulers of the World State, frowned on thinking without directives, especially by those beyond control, such as the Internationals, of which Mark Lynn was a great leader.

THINKING led to individualism, and the latter to conflict of opinions, eventually to become conflict of a far more deadly sort. The recent past was an unerasable record of promiscuous thinking; it had brought too many problems, social and economic—it was wasteful, slipshod and inefficient. So it became a matter of unalterable policy to train each individual rigidly in that station in life to which he was best fitted, where he or she could function with maximum efficiency toward achievement. It became essential to apply control "one," which instilled into the mental patterns a dreadful guilt of waste—whether of energy, credits or time, much as the ancient Puritans lived in the fear of their consciences and could never be comfortable or enjoy frivolous moments or leisure. Control "six" became an obsession to achieve, subtly replacing the emotional complex of what in an earlier day was called "ambition," until nothing, literally nothing could stand before that one, all-important goal. And finally, control "fifteen" became an absolute need for guidance, a pattern that subtly replaced the instinct for security of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, so that all problems, all crises were solved by the Council. An attempt to make individual solutions, resulted in an awful sense of "aloneness," of absolute insecurity that could drive a civic or ruralian to the verge of a psychosis. There were other controls,

some major and some minor, but these three, one, six and fifteen, were the three imperatives. Mark Lynn was impervious to them—he had to be to belong to the Internationals.

WITH the sealed cylinder in an inner pocket of his tunic, that boasted a golden sun embroidered on the chest, Mark left the building and made his way through the milling crowds in the streets. They were all hurrying to some individual task—office workers in the black gowns of their calling; artisans with wide, tooled belts. The violet-eyed Martian proctors who acted as guards, and the tiny, slender Venusians, with their vari-colored wings and melodious voices. Scientists of the various orders were hurrying to the transportation belts, while technicians in their bright blue tunics went in and out of different buildings. There was no confusion, no disorder, despite the evident haste.

Shops were closed, deserted or wrecked by earthquakes. Many buildings were in partial ruins, others had huge cracks along the sides. Yet, from the public vis-screens posted along the street came glimpses of beautiful scenes and soft, seductive music. A light powdery snow was falling, and the wind danced a sara-band unchecked.

"Weather control stations must have failed," Mark said inwardly, and breathed deeply, gratefully, the keen, icy freshness of the wind.

An old woman, a ruralian carrying a huge bundle, spied him and eagerly grasped his arm. "Greetings, International! Pray give an old woman information! I've farmed my allotment and *achieved* ten years ahead of my plan, and now they tell me I must move to Venus! I don't mind the moving—though I mistrust those winged creatures—but I'm old and very tired. Does my moving mean I'll have another allotment to achieve? Must I clear Venusian land? Tell me International, if I'm assigned to a freighter, will the graves be likely to shorten what remains of my life-span?"

Mark laughed at the loud avalanche of questions. "Peace, Ruralian," he managed through his laughter. "I doubt if you'll be required to *achieve* another

allotment. Didn't the government grant you sufficient credits for a new start?"

The ruralian woman pulled out a package of rank, Venusian cigarets and contentedly puffed on one after lighting it. "Yes, when the earth-temblors ruined my land and a mouth of fire finished it, a proctor came from the Council and gave me enough credits to last a body a lifetime, then told me to make my way to transportation. But I can't bring myself to spend those credits, International—it's wasteful. . . . I'd rather achieve another allotment. Why, I haven't bought a thing for fifty years that I could grow or make myself!

"I've been some time getting here from the Arizona sector, for the shakes disrupted the conveyor roads, and I lost a lot of things when another mouth of fire pushed up where the road was and blew my cart to the four winds— It's a miracle I'm here at all! But about the freighter, will the graves. . . ."

"Ask for the sleep-freeze . . . it will be given you, in any event. If anything, it'll lengthen your span, and the journey will seem like an overnight trip to you. If you need directing, a proctor will assist you. Greetings Ruralian!" Mark tried to make his tones as kindly as he possibly could, but realizing the woman was eager to make conversation, he ended the incident—he was still on duty.

"Greetings, International," she replied disappointed, and heaved the bundle to her shoulder.

Mark had not walked ten paces when instant correlation between his senses, mental synthesis and muscular reaction made him swerve aside, bending over at the same time. It had been the horror-shocked expression in the eyes of a technician barely three paces before him, that had sent the Spacer hurtling to one side, half bent over, bowling pedestrians aside like ten-pins. A thin pencil of light flashed where Mark's head had been seconds before. Mark had turned without pausing and he saw a tall International whose yellow tunic bore the red whorl insignia of a conveyor-road inspector.

Mark's molecular rate was faster than any other strata, purposely, because of his calling, and to the spectators it seemed as if he'd twisted, turned and flung himself

into a prodigious tackle all in one motion. The attacking International, fully as tall as mark, went down under the terrific impact, his atomo-pistol sailing through the icy atmosphere in a falling arc. But with the agility of a Martian Hellacorum, he was up and snarling: "Traitor!" through clenched teeth. With a cry of baffled fury he launched himself at Mark unhesitatingly, one hand fumbling at his belt.

But Mark ducked, side-stepping. He was icy calm now, although the reason for this attack baffled him. Mark was in his element in a fight; the International Police trained its wards to be fighting machines, deadly in their efficiency. Explorers had to be!

II

MARK wheeled as the attacker hurtled past him and his straight left went unerringly to the man's head, jarring him. Automatically Mark's training came to the fore, as everything else faded until it was only Spacer Lynn and a murderous enemy. Mark's right was a peg upon which he hung the attacker's blasting blow, while he used the boxer's left, long and weaving, throwing it swiftly like a cat sparring with a mouse dangling by the tail from its teeth. His left bounced off the attacker's chin. It was a little high, but the man rocked on his heels.

The killer rushed. Mark let his heels touch the ground, refused to run. The attacker was too aggressive and eager for complete defense. Mark caught him with a left and right and calmly took a murderous hook to the belly without flinching, then he let his right hand ride, dropping it like a sledge-hammer. The attacker's face seemed to lose contour, its features blurred as the face went gory; his feet crossed and his knees went suddenly rubbery. The conveyor-road inspector fell with a crash and didn't get up.

Mark became suddenly aware that two Martian proctors flanked him, deadly atomo-pistols pressing at his sides.

"Silence and obedience, International! Follow!" came the crisp, laconic order from the senior proctor.

Instantly a visi-screen lighted and a cold, imperious voice directed:

"Remove the attacker, dispose as power

reserve. Spacer Lynn proceed on mission!"

In unison, the two proctors saluted and the atomo-pistols disappeared. It was the voice of the Council, through some subordinate.

"The eyes and ears of the universe!" Mark Lynn exclaimed ironically in a whisper. The cometary reaction must have been psychological as well as physical to bring about crime in a social order where for centuries it had disappeared. Or had it? Mark wondered. How many secrets, how much factual data the Council kept from the people? No one would ever know. But why try to liquidate him? He'd just arrived from years in outer space; surely he couldn't possibly have enemies on Terra! Was his mission known? And come to think of it, just what was his mission actually? Meditatively, he tapped the cylinder in the inner pocket of his tunic. Could *that* have been the motive for the assault?

"PALANTH!" Mark Lynn exclaimed delightedly as he spied a dandified Martian leaning against a column of chrysophrase, upon entering the lobby of the International Police headquarters to report.

Tall and sinewy-lean, with the exaggeratedly narrow waist characteristic of the Martians, Palanth gazed startled at his companion of many adventures, from behind a silken square of Venusian-spider silk drenched in the overpowering fragrance of Venusian jasmines. Only the violet eyes were visible, startling against the background of his flaming hair.

In the tight-fitting yellow tunic of an International, he resembled an ancient, narrow-waisted cretan come to life, but for the flaming mane and towering height.

"Greetings! O bird of ill-omen, what malodorous wind blew you in from outer space?" He dropped the handkerchief long enough to reveal chiselled nostrils and white even teeth as he smiled heart-warmingly. He placed his left hand on Mark's shoulder, in the immemorial gesture Mars reserved for the closest friends.

"One sec, Planetarian, while I check in," Mark grinned also placing his hand on the Martian's shoulder, knowing how it annoyed the Martian to be called by a lower

rank. Mark stepped into a booth that automatically recorded his status as the visi-screen panel glowed into life.

"Spacer Mark Lynn, Exploratory Astrogator First Class, reporting. Under sealed orders from the Supreme Council. Last station Io. Awaiting further orders." In a thousand departments that recorded global information and checked it in detail even psychologically, Mark's words automatically became part of the endless record. But there was no answer. The visi-screen faded to a smoldering green and went blank.

"Strange!" Mark muttered to himself, stepping out of the booth. "These orders must be final." He touched the slight bulge made by the cylinder he carried.

Curiosity was beginning to needle him, but orders from the Council could only be opened in absolute privacy, especially sealed orders.

Palanth was waiting for him, the eternal handkerchief pressed against his nose. A brilliant panagran, blood-red and flashing made a deep spot of color against his left ear-lobe. Everything about him seemed indolent, aesthetic, super-refined. And the exquisite fragrances from the known universe with which he drenched his squares of silk, thanks to his mania against human odors, added to the foppish effect.

"Have you come to twist the tail of the comet, O thou especially not wanted?"

PALANTH waved his handkerchief diffusing jasmines in the rich austerity of the lobby, as he lounged back against the column with a sigh that might have meant anything. His yellow tunic—as near the color of gold as he dared, without actually being the hue reserved for the Supreme head of the Council, shimmered like watered silk. His slender hands flashed with *acerines* and *calchuites*.

"Breath-taking, as usual," Mark was grinning from ear to ear, "specially that godawful jungle fumes you're soaked in . . . arrgh! I can't breathe!"

"My only defense against you creatures," Palanth said languidly. "I need replenishing, Mark, shall we go?"

"Lord, yes. I could eat an European." Mark checked himself as an odd tight expression came into his eyes, and his hand tightened on something hard inside a

lower pocket of his tunic. He fell unaccountably silent for a moment.

Palanth strode beside him with a lithe, tigerish stride which belied his now forgotten languid pose of a few minutes ago. His deceptive exterior—which many to their final regret had found could disappear like lightning, still made him see a Planetarian fop whom the Council permitted harmless foibles for reasons of their own.

"I never hoped to see you again after that crash on Europa." Palanth exclaimed with a relieved sigh. "You're so reckless, Mark, and death is so permanent!"

"Of course, *you* are not reckless," Mark taunted with obvious irony, remembering how the Martian International could explode into action like an enraged Martian Hella. "In your superior wisdom, there's no reason to take chances—everything's planned in advance, logically, coldly. . . . Bah. Do you recall that little incident on Venus when they served you imitation Thessalian and that little Venusian baggage tried to dope you with . . ."

"Cease! O chattering . . ." Palanth interrupted as near being embarrassed as it was possible for him to be. The rest of what he said was buried in the perfumed handkerchief which he hastily pressed against his face as they joined the crowds that filled the avenue.

"But what are you here for? It is permissible to know?" Mark asked soberly at last.

"I may as well tell you," Palanth said, his tones muffled by the handkerchief. "You'd never have the imagination to guess!"

"You probably have been appointed to regulate the last batch of outgoing freighters enroute to various space stations, in order to relieve congestion and ease pressure of transportation. There may be something else . . . eh?"

"Master mind! But there's that last *something else* that you'd never guess."

"Inductive reasoning tells me that a freight coordinator would be assigned to freight problems . . . let me talk . . . but this seems to be the last time that old Terra is going to send freight anywhere. I feel there's one last measure to be taken against the unpredictable—something calculated to checkmate a future result. Oh I know I sound as if I were talking gibberish,

Palanth, but well . . . it's still sort of foggy in my mind. I'll know more when I read my orders."

"I've already read mine," Palanth said quietly. I'm persuaded they're not very different from yours—in the last analysis. It's a gigantic game, Mark!"

"Then you know?"

"Yes!" It was almost a whisper, almost a telepathic assent. "But here's our energy center, let's go on in."

ONCE WITHIN the vast dining-hall, known as an Energy Center, they selected a table and from the menu the number of the meal that suited them, pressing the numerically corresponding stud on the panel above the table. The food came on a conveyor belt that passed beneath the floor and emerged from the center of the table which was hollow and had a panel that slid aside as the food arrived.

"Well, what have you learned," Palanth asked Mark as they began their meal.

Mark Lynn outlined what he knew and added a few conjectures of his own, and Palanth's face split gradually in a wide grin.

"A pretty mess. . . . How many of you flesh-eating mammals are there left to transport . . . the irreconcilables, I mean, the dissenters."

"Roughly about five hundred million. They're an amazing mixture of Internationals, Philosophers and Ruralians—the three most individualistic strata!"

"It would be easier to ray them down, let the Comet wipe them out in due time, than to go to all this trouble of persuading them to evacuate." Palanth retorted coldly. "Still, to my Martian mind, they're far more valuable than your herds of controlled sheep—at least, they can think for themselves!"

"However, in a controlled, beneficent political economy such as the World State, any such benevolent treatment as raying them down, or abandoning them to sidereal extinction is outlawed," a quiet, mellow voice said behind them.

Both Mark and Palanth looked up with a start to see the exquisite oval face with the serious, limpid hazel eyes of Doctor Fortun, in her purple scientist tunic. Palanth rose instantly and bowed, Mark was but a fraction of a second behind him.

"It's a rare honor for Spacers to enjoy socially the company of a Scientist," Mark said gravely, but his eyes were dancing.

"Probably just as well, if you express such unorthodox opinions freely," she replied sitting between them at the table. "However, we have a long journey ahead, might as well begin to know each . . . as we really are." Her smile was an adventure, and when she turned her head to survey Palanth with frank curiosity, Mark noted that her hair escaping the tight-fitting kepis was almost the color of dark honey in the sun.

"A long journey. . ." Palanth murmured as he picked absorbedly at something on his plate that resembled purple pop-corn. "A long journey, where . . . how, and to what end?"

"What are you eating?" Doctor Fortun asked almost too casually, instead of replying.

"These? Oh, candied violets," Palanth's languid pose had returned aware that many eyes were upon him in the crowded energy center.

"Don't you have enough perfume as it is without eating it too?" Mark growled.

"Peace, O spawn of unthinkable misfortune!" Palanth said grandly and filled his mouth with the delicacy.

DOCTOR FORTUN laughed aloud, it was like the tintinnabulation of clustered silver bells.

"Fraud!" she exclaimed amiably. "If I were not acquainted with your past record I'd think you were a fop. Does that pose ever fool anybody, Palanth?"

The tall Martian grinned shrugging his shoulders. "Who knows? *It's been so long since I've had adventure for a bride!*" He quoted a line from the famous Terran poet of the twenty-first century.

"He's done it so long, it's become second nature with him," Mark said inelegantly. "However, the perfume business is no pose. Wait till you see his collection of extracts!"

Palanth glared at him, but remained silent. Just then a growing tremor shook the energy center, and one of the walls split from floor to ceiling. Their table fell with a crash and the hum of the food conveyors ceased. Voices rose in startled exclamations and the crash of other tables added to the increasing noise. A convul-

sive heave rent the floor and the continuous series of audio-pictures on the visi-screen ceased abruptly.

After what seemed an eternity, in reality seconds, the quake subsided, leaving wreckage behind and the pale, strained faces of the guests.

"Even here in North America, the very heart of the World State, the quakes are increasing," Doctor Fortun said thoughtfully. "Our estimates gave us eight more weeks before the proximity of the comet neutralized astro-warp evacuation. It seems hardly possible, but there may be elements in the situation we have failed to calculate. I believe the sooner we complete evacuation the better it'll be." She glanced at Mark speculatively.

"I suggest you read your orders this evening, once you're registered at International House, Spacer Lynn."

"That's my plan," Mark told her. "And speaking of unknown elements, I'm still puzzled at being attacked by an International today. I was unaware that I had enemies on Terra. What could the motive have been?"

"Attacked?" Palanth was instantly alert. "Why didn't you tell me, Mark?"

The Spacer shrugged his shoulders. "It was a minor incident—only, it's mystery bothers me. I've been taught there's no crime on Terra, and I am too unimportant for political liquidation."

"You forget," Doctor Fortun said softly, "the profound dislocations brought about by this unforeseen situation. Two-thirds of Terra's population have been evacuated. Another third—the most intractable, refuses cooperation. There are many sympathizers in high places. In the inevitable confusion, the efficiency of the World State has been impaired. What would have been impossible a few months ago, can happen now. You're not only our chief explorer, but a name to conjure with among Internationals—your word has never been broken. Being suspected of having become a subservient tool of the Council is enough for certain elements to consider you too dangerous to their aims—therefore, guard your life, Spacer!"

"But I'm not a tool!" Mark exclaimed fiercely. "My allegiance to the Council only involves my life—not the lives of

others—I'll not defraud them, dissenters or not!"

DOCTOR FORTUN smiled quietly, as if contemplating some inner scene. The brilliant hazel eyes were veiled and whatever activity went on behind the smooth forehead was masked. The confusion within the Energy Center had subsided, and the guests were leaving now in orderly fashion, but as fast as possible.

"It's time to exit," the girl said casually. "Pity we were interrupted just when we were beginning to really know each other." Suddenly her manner changed as with what seemed an unconscious gesture she removed the tight-fitting cap and her hair fell about her shoulders with the gleaming patina of dark gold. Her smile had the demure sweetness of an embarrassed girl, her eyes were soft and luminous as she gazed first at Mark and then at Palanth.

"There's a strato-cruiser of the first order leaving at six for a resort on the gulf of Mexico—Havanol—it's perhaps the last time we'll have a chance to see it. Shall we . . ." she hesitated, "shall we dine there?" Rose mantled her cheeks and her long lashes swept downwards as she made the suggestion.

"Havanol!" Mark was enchanted. "Martial music and food to tempt archangels . . . but how can you and I enter Havanol? It's open only to special permit!"

"You're not by any remote chance forgetting me?" Palanth inquired with elaborate irony. "I've never seen Havanol, besides, I'm sure Doctor Fortun would like to use some Parnassin for the occasion."

"Parnassin! The perfume of the butterfly orchids of Venus! Why, Palanth, it's worth more than *calchuites*—it's the rarest, the most unattainable of extracts!" Doctor Fortun clasped her hands in ecstasy at the very thought of it. Then her rigid scientific training asserted itself. "But I couldn't wear it, it's like evaporating a fortune in credits within a few hours," she said unhappily.

"Bother, control 'one,' forget it for one memorable night!" Palanth was exasperated. "I know its antidote—and I have it!" he said savagely.

"So have I," Mark said grinning.

"**T**HASSALIAN?" the girl was startled. It was the forbidden Martian liquor of the Gods. It could achieve almost miraculous cures when taken in tiny doses; it gave the sensation of ineffable happiness, and when taken to excess, it drove the addict hopelessly insane.

"We still haven't solved the problem of the special permit," Mark reminded them.

"I have one for a party of four, which I haven't used as yet," Doctor Fortun said with a hint of shyness. "You'll have time to read your orders and then I'll pick you both up at International House in my helicopter. Agreed?"

"Agreed!" Both Mark and Palanth said fervently. They watched the slight figure of the girl as she made her way through the crowds with precision, her purple tunic vivid against the white carpet of fallen snow. "Her mind was well guarded!" Palanth thought aloud.

"It is a mind of power, or I would have contacted it," Mark barely whispered without moving his lips.

"Still, there can be nothing at Havanol that we can't cope with," Palanth shot a powerful telepathetic vibration at the Earthian Spacer. "Have you had the feeling of being under spy-ray, Mark?"

"Yes, for months . . . but I've guarded my mind, and as you know, the Council's spy-ray is not quite effective on those beyond controls one, six and fifteen; we're beyond conditioning for penetration by their mental synthesis. At times they're able to obtain partial ideation which they reconstruct and reform into thought-pattern trends—but hell! our thought-trends and individualistic patterns have been known to them all our lives. However, we are being used as tools—indirectly!"

"We have no proof, Earthman! In any event, within certain limits we are still free agents. Their orders may be one thing, what we do . . . is another. This cataclysm has shorn the World State of most of its power, on Terra at any rate. Mars and Venus would sweep the resettlements off their planets if the Terran fleet weren't constantly on guard!"

"Havanol may give us an inkling of what the game is!" Mark observed. "The whole secret lies within the reason for evacuating the irreconcilables. The Civi-

cans, Guildians, Technicians and Ruralians are merely the base of the pyramid; between them and the Scientists there's a gap that must be filled by the Internationals and the Philosophers—without pioneers and thinkers in the abstract, their rule's static. Their scheme, whatever it is, fails without us." Mark was telepathically communicating with Palanth his conclusions as they neared International House.

Palanth's violet eyes narrowed in amusement. "They no doubt have a surprise for us in store—how poetic that we should be the ones to surprise them!" The Martian waved his perfumed kerchief and the sparkling iciness of the breeze was scented with fresh jasmines.

III

MARK'S HAND tightened on the hard object he carried in a lower pocket of his tunic. It seemed to him as if an immeasurably distant vibration reached the very top of his brain where the most difficult thinking is done. It was a fleeting thought, the barest sidereal whisper, that was gone almost the instant it impinged upon his mind. Could the final answer lie there for them?

With Terra gone, or made uninhabitable, they would be homeless children of space, unless they subjected themselves to the prosaic, uninspiring existence of the planetarian settlements, limited by space, rigidly under Council control—their lives but pawns in a gigantic game that was planned for centuries to come with a cold, mathematical impersonality that reduced life to a mechanical phenomenon. Mark shuddered slightly.

"Yes, Palanth, poetic justice indeed! Come to my apartment at International House, I want to tell you a story . . . the story of what happened on Europa when I was Mark the daredevil, recorded as Hugh Betancourt—the surname of my Mentor before I earned my rank and the right to use my own name. Jim Brannigan was my second in command, when he crashed our ship on Europa. . . ." He was smiling with a distant look in his eyes.

Later, they met Doctor Fortun.

She was still sheathed in the filmy tunic of silver-violet she had worn at Havanol. The fragrance of Venusian butterfly-

orchids was a faint invitation to desire. But her firm, capable hands at the controls, sent the luxurious helio-plane hurtling through the stratosphere at a dizzy speed above a continental cloud bank.

Dawn was beginning in a young flood of opalescent fire; the ship was dipping and the clouds were swirling. Doctor Fortun sat silent with an enigmatic smile on her lips. Mark Lynn didn't speak lest he break the spell, while Palanth leaned back in his mullioned seat, eyes closed, recapturing the past memorable hours.

At last the terrain became visible.

It seemed only seconds and they were hovering above the immense interplanetary field where vast spacers awaited launching. Built to accommodate hundreds of thousands, their titanic proportions dwarfed everything around them. Doctor Fortun touched the controls of her helio-plane, and instantly the ship veered and aimed straight for one of the spacers. She flicked a lever and locked the controls. Calmly, she released another lever, and the robot pilot took over. She leaned back with a sigh, her shoulders slumped, silent still.

Mark Lynn's eyes widened. "What are you doing! We'll crash against that Spacer. . . ." He leaped to the controls but the locking mechanism had been set for arrival and could not be unlocked until the ship came to a stop. At the urgency in his voice, Palanth jerked forward wide awake, in time to glimpse the cavernous proportions of the starboard port of the interplanetary spacer yawning open to receive them.

As it entered the stupendous spacer, the helio-plane decelerated suddenly, coming to an abrupt stop that pressed them back against their ultra-padded seats as if a gigantic hand had pushed them back. Instantly the spacer's port closed automatically without a sound and vari-colored lights flashed within the ship. A bell rang shrilly, insistently somewhere.

"Strap yourselves immediately and push that small lever on the side of your seats, it'll convert them into couches," Doctor Fortun directed hurriedly. "Prepare for launching!" She herself was already busy converting her own seat and then strapping herself. From a pocket of her tunic she took a tiny box and opening it took two pellets which she swallowed; within sec-

onds she was unconscious. Mark reached over and took the box from her nerveless fingers. "Vanadol! For those who do not wish the sleep-freeze, Palanth! Do you want any? Or will you withstand the grays?"

"Neither, I'll submerge my conscious mind and thus preserve everything that occurs in my subconscious without suffering the effects of acceleration."

"So will I," Mark agreed. His dark green eyes were lambent with fury. "We've been tricked very neatly, old Spacer. We're going somewhere, willy-nilly. The first trick's theirs!" He gazed at the unconscious form of the girl with a mixture of sorrow and anger. "The same old story on a higher plane," he whispered to himself. "A memorable night—and the next day shanghaied into space! I wonder if the ancients staffed their crude water vessels in this manner?"

AS THEY submerged their conscious minds, a buzzer vibrated throughout the interplanetary spacer, a tremor went through the beryllium alloy monster and suddenly it catapulted into space on the astro-warp, robot-controlled until beyond the gravitational pull of Terra. The tiny Helio-Plane, tiny in comparison with the titanic spacer, hung suspended in a special cradle to minimize still further the effects of 2g's acceleration. Doctor Fortun and the two Internationals were too valuable to take chances. But the incongruous three were beyond inductive thinking as the "Stellar-Virgin" leaped away from Earth.

They didn't hear a mechanical voice order: "Free fall into orbit three." Presently the ship settled into the warp. After a while, the same mechanical voice ordering: "Free fall into orbit nine." Presently the Space Drive took hold as the interplanetary cruiser warped out into free space. The normal gravity plates began to function and instantly the pressure ceased.

Color returned to Mark Lynn's face, he was the first to awaken. From where he lay, he could see the still form of Palanth, a fallen dishevelled giant, and the fragile figure of Doctor Fortun, pale as death and as still. A pang of pity shot through him, then remembering, a surge of anger made his eyes grow cold.

Leisurely he unstrapped himself and

stretched, then went over and unstrapped his two companions. "Well, we're together, for better or for worse," he sighed. Just then Palanth shuddered and opened his violet eyes; at sight of Mark he sat up abruptly, passing a dazed hand over his eyes. Then he saw the still unconscious form of Doctor Fortun and recollection came to him.

"She's still asleep," Mark said softly. "Let her rest, we'll have ample time for explanations."

Suddenly Palanth laughed. "Shanghaied, by Jupiter's Red Spot!" He searched assiduously for his eternal kerchief. "Ah, here it is . . ." then remembering, "My extracts! All my fragrances that have taken years to collect, left on Terra!" He cursed venomously in five interplanetary dialects until he was out of breath.

"Magnificent!" Mark commented admiringly.

PALANTH subsided into smoldering fury, his great eyes almost black, the chiselled nostrils quivering. To him it was an appalling loss.

"Go on, don't stop now," Mark urged him grinning. "Later, when she wakes up, you won't be able to mourn your perfumes; now's your chance, besides I'd like some of those remarks for my own collection, Planetarian!"

"You'll find them in your private quarters awaiting you in the Spacer," a wan voice said wearily. "I feel as if I'd been mangled," Doctor Fortun sighed tremulously. Both men turned toward the girl, but her slender body had not stirred, the eyes were closed, only a tiny, tired smile hovered on the curving lips.

"Didn't know you were awake!" Mark reddened at the recollection of the lurid language.

"Praise be to Antares! My extracts . . . where are they, where are my quarters . . . let's get out of here!" Palanth could think of nothing but his priceless collection. "Without them I'd have to condition myself to pollution!"

"You're not very complimentary, Martian!" Doctor Fortun chided, her hazel eyes flickered open and she sat up. The girl surveyed Mark Lynn with calm, clear eyes. "What, no violence, not even recriminations? What an utterly erroneous concep-

tion the Council has about you Internationals," she observed, and waited for Mark to speak.

"We don't indulge in futilities, Doctor Fortun," Mark replied. "But perhaps you can give us an inkling of what all this is about; I think we deserve at least that much, Scientist!"

The girl seemed to meditate in silence. An odd, half fearful, half ashamed expression flitted across her features. "Yes, you deserve a great deal more than I can offer you, Spacer Lynn. But I'm afraid I can only give you another unpleasant experience to chalk up against me. It's all part of a pattern agreed upon even before you and your companion arrived on Terra. It was thought that only your influence on Internationals and Philosophers could persuade them to evacuate—they'd believe you, where they would never trust the Council. It was necessary that you be seen on Terra—when you entered the Council building, it was visi-screened in detail throughout the World State; your encounter with the attacker on the street, was seen by countless millions. It had to be established that you were on Terra, and in touch with the Council, so that your audio-visi-screen broadcast should be considered *authentic*."

"BUT I didn't broadcast, my orders from the Council were to promise all Internationals, Philosophers and the Ruralians—in fact, all dissenters—a habitable planet to which they would be transported in sleep-freeze, together with all metallic substances, seeds, plasms, drugs, food, in fact everything required for their normal existence for a five-year cycle—free from interference by the Government of the World State—provided they agreed to furnish the World State with an equal amount of materials within one hundred years. I never believed for an instant that the Council would relinquish control, the absolute lack of weapons, or of machinery to fashion them, was in itself a proof of intentions beyond the letter of the offer. I meant to refuse to broadcast to the irconcilables my personal guarantee as demanded by the Council. Besides, I know of no such planet."

"That was why I took you to Havanol," Doctor Fortun nodded sadly. "The Council anticipated your refusal—your psycho-

logical data easily told them that—and since at Havanol only those with special permit could enter, the guests were specially chosen, so that none without the scientific circle knew you were there, thus your broadcast became authentic in the minds of the dissenters. You noticed there were no visi-screens at Havanol, under the excuse that nothing that did not contribute to pleasure could be permitted."

"But I tell you, I didn't broadcast!" Mark was becoming exasperated. "You keep on harping on that!"

"No, but your double did," the girl's voice was opaque. "Turn on the visi-screen in the Spacer, and you'll learn the truth. Everything that has been visi-screened on Terra since your arrival, was recorded in the Spacer's telecast—simply select the broadcasts of the date and hour when we went to Havanol, and it will be shown on the visi-screen panel in the Commander's quarters. Your double—part resemblance, part surgico-synthesis even imitates your voice within one-tenth of a microgram of its tonal quality. Detection was beyond human power, Spacer Lynn."

"If I ever get my hands on him . . .!" Mark's fingers clenched spasmodically as his face went dark with passion.

"You never will," the girl said sadly, "nor on the double who took the place of Palanth . . . even that detail was taken care of, perfumes and all," her smile was bitter. "By now, both have been converted to power reserve, their usefulness having ended." There was an uncomfortable pause, the silence becoming oppressive in the luxurious helio-plane of the girl.

"Who's the Commander of the Interplanetary Spacer?" Mark asked at last, his agile mind already seeking means to circumvent the snare.

"*You!*" was the laconic reply.

"I? Has the Council gone mad? Do they think that after what's happened they can place a spacer in my power, and still command my allegiance? I can lose their damned Patrol in uncharted space . . . *and I will!*"

"No, Spacer Lynn, you'll have to find a better, a more definitive solution than that. You see, you promised millions a planet of freedom, where they could build a new civilization patterned after the old American Constitution, but on

an even greater, a wider plane of being. You promised them freedom from the Council, and a chance to develop untrammelled not only their minds but their emotions as well; you do not know it, but your double was trained as a great actor, years of conditioning and training taught him to ring the changes of emotion on human souls not deadened by the controls. Reports showed that millions wept, that a tidal wave of joy coursed through their ranks sending them pouring like a human cataract into the awaiting spacers, and sleep-freeze, Mark!"

IV

"**H**AVE you the figures on how many agreed to evacuate?" Mark's face was white and tense. Palanth was silent, immobile, in the hieratic attitude of Martians in deep thought.

"Roughly, three hundred million. I received the secret report just before we left Havanol."

"Where are they now?" Mark forced himself to ask.

"Travelling in space under robot control. When they arrive within the orbit of Europa, they will remain in an orbit calculated to parallel the trajectory of our Universe in space, in relation to the orbit of Europa, so that they will be like satellites of that planet. You will find an instrument in your quarters, which when operated activates a vibrational beam of such potency that it will contact the robot control of those spacers, causing them to land on the planet at various places and intervals. The major task will be to administer the antidote to sleep-freeze, but as each dissenter's awakened, he or she can join in awakening the rest. Your task is to build a civilization of Europa, a civilization with all the technical science of Terra, and to thoroughly develop that planet."

"But why Europa? It's a bleak world of cold and bare rocks, lit by a hellish crimson radiation from Jupiter's red spot, deserted, unhospitable . . ."

"But habitable, and rich in minerals, a large world with which to replenish a ravaged earth. The moon, our Luna, will go, Mark. The Council plans to eventually move Europa from its orbit to take the place of our Moon! What happened to

you when you crashed there, is known to the Council; they inspected your ship and found it had been expertly repaired with rare metals and superb skill. By spy-ray they obtained enough out of your mind to obtain a pattern. You didn't have reserve oxides with you on that trip, yet oxides had been used in repairing your ship; an assortment of special tools were needed to make the repairs—tools you didn't have with you, yet the work had been done with a skill that surpassed that of our best technicians. And, finally, it was established that your skull had been crushed from behind, yet, you arrived in perfect health, the bone fracture entirely healed and with *thrice the energy* reserve of a normal man! as a psychologist, I worked on the report. It was startling!"

"I see. And if I refuse to be part of their plan?" Mark's voice had the flat tones of a man condemned to death.

"**YOU** will be sentenced to power reserve, and Europa taken by force. A scientist will be placed in charge and armed proctors brought to preserve obedience. The Council hopes such measures will not be necessary—it will mean a constant struggle with the dissenters, and Venus and Mars might take advantage of the situation to begin the ancient wars all over again. That is why they are willing to give you a free rein. Ultimately of course, they envision the planet as a satellite of the Earth, its population under complete Council control."

"I'll not live to see that tragic day!" Mark's voice held infinite conviction.

"Neither will I," seconded Palanth.

"I suppose you're the direct representative of the Council?" Mark asked the girl. "You'll keep them informed of everything we do!" There was contempt in his deep, bitter voice.

"Don't spare my feelings!" Doctor Fortun smiled with a quiet sadness. "I've told everything but what the Supreme Council instructed me to say. I was to tell you another story . . . to play enchantress and keep you lulled, if necessary, in a fool's paradise. But controls one, six and fifteen never quite worked with me. I've had to feign a lot and mask my mind lest I be condemned to power control. We Psychologists are very few—it's our only defense.

Those we instruct in the techniques of the mind, must join our guild and swear allegiance to us! Why do you think I arranged to come on this trip? For love of the Council?"

"I'm a woman, Mark! I want a home instead of a clinic and a husband instead of an order for fertilization. I want to experience the rapture that is love and have children. I came because I thought the very qualities in you the Council means to utilize might be the means of circumventing their purpose and . . . and make us free!"

An incredulous look of surprise spread over Mark's face. For an instant he wondered if the Machiavellian tactics of the Council could extend even this far. But with a determined mental effort he probed the girl's mind and found it was unguarded. There was no trickery, no deception in her mind, even as the tears that blurred the lovely hazel eyes were genuine.

"Venus be praised!" He exclaimed fervently, and it was all he could do to refrain from taking her in his arms and kissing away the tears that were rolling down her cheeks.

"She speaks the truth," Palanth said telepathically, there was a trace of embarrassment in his thoughts. "She will be a most valuable ally in our fight."

MARK smiled, his face had lighted as if a profound grief had been removed. "You already know we'll fight, eh, Palanth?"

"But of course, O Terran of dubious intellect!" The Martian said grandly and waved the sadly crumpled kerchief now almost devoid of its overpowering perfume. He was himself again, eager for the intellectual struggle against overwhelming odds.

"What sort of intelligence is there on Europa?" Doctor Fortun asked, once more in control of herself.

"Exquisite beings with a mental power beyond our own, but resembling nothing human," Mark replied.

"Let's leave this helio. I'm anxious to inspect the Spacer; I've never commanded a ship of this size."

"How many are aboard and what are they?" Palanth inquired. "I hope they're Internationals!"

"I don't know the figures, Palanth, but I'm certain at least ninety percent are Internationals. I do know at least five hundred scientists of various categories are aboard. They'll be the first to be awakened from sleep-freeze, for at journey's end, they take charge."

"And who's going to give them the antidote?" Mark asked silkily.

"Robots, timed to administer it the moment we land on Europa. They have orders to direct resettlement without interfering too much—and of course, they are the eyes and ears of the Council; they are the only ones who have the necessary equipment for interplanetary communication, as you'll find out!"

"I think they need a long, long rest, don't you Palanth?" Mark was smiling.

"Indeed, O protector of the martyred!" Palanth exclaimed grandiloquently. They must be tired, very tired . . . of anything but sleep!"

"I've never seen these robots," Mark Lynn thought aloud. "Are there many, Doctor Fortun?"

"Approximately fifty—more than necessary, but they're to be used on landing by the scientists. These robots, Mark, are humanoid in their mental processes, able to perform tasks too difficult for human beings, especially in the mathematical field. They are created secretly, for the peoples of the World State must not know of their invention—there would be no need for labor if they were to be produced in sufficient numbers; production of necessities and luxuries could be increased a thousand fold, and . . . it would destroy the present social philosophy of the World State. It would remove the *credo* of achievement, it would abolish the standards of rigid thrift and conservation in a world of undreamed plenty, and finally, with robots able to solve the most intricate problems the absolute need for guidance would be neutralized.

"The Supreme Council had these robots built for their exclusive use. Only one thousand exist, we've been allotted fifty because Europa's been acknowledged as a major achievement."

"Can they be neutralized—the robots, I mean?" Mark was thinking at a furious pace.

"These robots are impressionless, blank, so to speak. Their only motivation is to

administer the sleep-freeze antidote to the scientists aboard. After that, the scientists can direct them to required tasks, and each problem as it is solved by the robot, remains in its mechanical nero-pattern for repetition if necessary. They're wholly metallic, almost indestructible. *Whoever uses them first, is their master!*"

IT WAS THEN that Mark unable to restrain himself, bent down and kissed her. "It occurs to me," he said very gently, that I've never known your social name."

"Lucero," the girl whispered. "It's an ancient, almost forgotten name of the romance languages now lost."

"The evening star!" Mark breathed. "No wonder you're golden . . ." Forgetting Palanth he was about to take her in his arms, when the latter coughed with the dry, hacking sound of the Martians.

"Are we going into the Spacer, or have we changed our minds?" he inquired of the universe in general. "Terra's being wrecked, we're shanghaied aboard a sleep-freeze coffin polluted with half a thousand scientists and fifty inimical robots; we are headed for an unexplored moon of Jupiter, in the mesh of a gigantic plot, and three hundred million victims are dependent on our wits . . . yet two highly specialized humans on whom the fate of a universe depends, are oblivious of it all like two Phobos-struck kaladonis! Arrgh . . . what a race, O Mind of ultimate understanding!" He bowed at the mention of the Martian all highest—the nameless God.

Both Lucero and Mark came to, faces crimson, smiling sheepishly. Together they left the helio-plane and went down an emergency ladder into the interior of the vast interplanetary Spacer.

Within the *Stellar Virgin* the silence was intense—the silence of a dead city. In the luxurious quarters provided for the scientists, the latter lay soundless and inert in the almost ultimate oblivion of sleep-freeze. They were ten in number to each mammoth, cavernous stateroom, and in the very center, upon a throne-like dais, motionless and life-like, a gigantic robot sat immobile, awaiting the end of the trip, when for the first time since they were fashioned, they would perform the only task impressed upon their virgin brains.

Mark Lynn went silently from cabin to

cabin, to all outward appearances inspecting the ship, but inwardly, his mental processes geared to the apex of their wide-awakeness, grappled endlessly with the problem of the robots. If the scientists awakened from the sleep-freeze thanks to the antidotes, they'd instantly command the robots for their initial tasks and thereafter they'd be masters of that incalculable source of power. With the robots under their command, the scientists would be masters indeed, able to dispose of the machinery within the Spacer at their will, to manufacture more machinery, build weapons and in short, control Europa.

He thought of the thousands of Internationals in the Spacer's hold, and his head ached with the sustained effort. It was a little thing that gave him the clue, the intense pain at the base of his brain was like a constant hammering, and Mark considered an infinitesimal dose of Vanadol. It would banish the pain as if by magic.

"Vanadol!" He exclaimed electrified. "By Io, Vanadol is the answer! How much Vanadol have we got aboard? Palanth, search the medical stores and find how much of the stuff we've brought along . . . hurry!" Mark's eyes were sparkling, green as emeralds.

Lucero regarded him curiously. "What's so important about Vanadol, Mark?"

"The scientists must not awaken until we have the robots under our command. By giving each scientist a heavy dose of Vanadol, enough for weeks of sleep, we circumvent the antidote for sleep-freeze. It's this way: when we land, the mechanism within each robot timed for release on arrival, activates them for their one and only task, the administration of anti-sleep freeze, but since each scientist will have been thoroughly drugged with Vanadol, they'll be released from sleep-freeze, but will continue to sleep under the powerful narcotic. The robots then will be given such commands as we decide on, and will be entirely answerable to us three only. They will facilitate immensely the task of making Europa truly habitable, and since they are almost indestructible, will be the most valuable of all weapons. Let's get busy, if there's enough Vanadol, we've won the first round after all!"

Presently the Martian returned, "There's

tons of the stuff," he announced. Mark had to explain all over again.

VI

"PANADUR!" Mark Lynn breathed softly as he glanced at the stark grandeur of Europa from one of the glass-ite ports. It was night. The macabre glow of Jupiter's Red Spot enveloped the satellite in a red opaline haze that made the vari-colored cliffs gleam with twisted flames in deep crimson and orange and purple. Over all, an eternal mantle of snow lay like frozen spume. Mark opened his hand and looked at the jewel he held. It was pulsing now with a fiery radiance.

The great spacer was lying in the cup-shaped hollow of the immense valley, resting on the blanketing snow, just as once before, a tiny cruiser had rested crippled in the fantastic European night. But it was different then. Mark remembered his chilling awe at the Dantesque panorama, and his shock when Jim Brannigan had found life on Europa, the strange, exquisitely furred bipeds with slender arms and six-fingered hands. He had thought them animals then, despite the bright intelligence shining in the beryl-eyes of the creatures. But he'd learned differently in time, when Jim had crushed his skull from behind, and the Panadurs had saved him by absorbing Jim's life-energy and transferring it to him while he lay unconscious. That was the miracle, that the metabolism of the Panadurs could absorb energy from any source and transfer it at will. They were telepathic, and their leader had given him the jewel to facilitate communication if Mark ever returned.

It was like the remembrance of a dream, to have the past pass in review through his mind as he methodically donned his allurium suit, and turned on the heating unit.

"I'm going out . . . alone," he said firmly to Palanth and Lucero. "I owe the inhabitants of this world a debt, and whether we remain or not, is for them to decide. You see this star-like jewel? That's the Star of Panadur; by concentrating my thoughts, it acts as a sort of transmitting crystal and will make it possible for me to reach the leader of the Panadurs. I will return." He smiled reassuringly into

Lucero's distraught face, and Palanth's scowling one.

"Why can't I accompany you?" The Martian growled. "Since when must I be left behind in the face of danger? Am I an old woman, Mark?"

"But there's no danger, Palanth! It's a promise I gave that never, never would I bring any intelligent creature to Panadur without their approval. This world's a treasure house, and the Panadurs are a treasure in themselves, for their fur is finer than anything in the Universe, including Neptune's moons. I know of a vast cavern floored with oxide, and cliffs of pure metal. Europa, or rather, Panadur, is an inexhaustible source of power! It remains with them—the Panadurs, whether we remain or not." He smiled at them again, almost pleadingly, for them to understand, and without another word, stepped through the air-locks and was gone. They could see his tall figure in its gleaming sheath outlined in the unearthly glow until it disappeared in the distance.

MARK LYNN let his mind be passive. Contact with the alien intelligence had been made; the jewel in his hand was now a burst of radiance, as he traversed the valley in the direction of the cavern country, and at last he was before the gigantic mass of cliffs he sought. He entered a low, gallery-like cave that wound downwards into the bowels of the cliff, following the twisting turns as the gallery widened and the luminescent walls became even more luminous, until at the end of a turn a burst of radiance met his eyes and he was once more in the grotto of titanic proportions lighted by the glaucous radiance, like the green light beneath the waters of a shallow sea. At his feet, crystalline and powdery, the entire floor of the grotto was covered by oxide as far as his eyes could see. Mark had the odd sensation of living a part of his life over again. He waited in silence.

Mark knew that thousands of burning beryl eyes were peering at him from concealed openings in the walls; he felt the mental rapport with their leader that was rapidly absorbing from his mind all that could be obtained. The wait was interminable. At last, a silvery-grey, furred being, was before Mark, seemingly having come from nowhere. It's exquisite triangular

face, with the wide-set beryl eyes and broad forehead, was startlingly human.

"Greetings, twice come!" the faint shadow of a smile seemed to cross its features as it telepathed the thought. "When your space machine landed, we feared the worst—but we are reassured. Your mind tells me that countless of your kind hover asleep over our world. What would you have us do?"

"Your permission to remain," Mark sent the telepathic reply. And then, in a welling flood of thought, poured out the story of what had happened on Terra, the resettlement of two-thirds of the population on other planets, and finally, their abhorrence of their Terran Government and its methods.

"Allow us, O Panadur, to build a new civilization on your world, a civilization where we may achieve happiness in freedom. We bring over two thousand Space machines laden with everything we can possibly need, and millions of eager beings. We will transform your world into a Paradise such as you have never known. Weather control stations will give Panadur freedom from cold and darkness; cities will be reared in beauty, and to you, we guarantee forever, freedom from attack; for if we do not remain on Panadur, whom the Terrans call Europa, the Council of Terra will never rest until it has been subjugated by its interstellar fleet. Your mines will be ravaged, your people will be enslaved, blood redder than the angry spot of the greater world will flow in rivers."

"And how can you prevent them from doing so, in any event?" the Pandur asked.

"WE WILL make your world impregnable. Each one of the Spacers that brings our people here, will be turned into a fighting cruiser; the minds of the greatest scientists of Terra will be utilized for our advancement . . . and, these scientists, five-hundred of them, now asleep, will be delivered into your care as hostages, together with fifteen robots, placed under your command. We will ensure your safety, in return for your scientific aid. We know you have no tools; even to repair a small rent on my cruiser when I crashed here before, took hundreds and hundreds of your people and the tools I had, plus weeks of work! The result was mag-

nificent, but I know how handicapped you were. My robots will build you machines of power, and we will give you that which you may choose from our ships. In insuring your safety, we ensure ours. One for all, and all for one, O Panadur. Fate has decreed that your world is in danger—shall we join forces?"

"It is true, Terran. We have achieved mental mastery, but we've never conquered our environment. Our hands," he extended fragile, six-fingered hands without thumbs, "are hardly suited to fashion tools. But with machines that create other machines . . . and metal beings such as I saw in your mind. . . ." A far away look came into beryl eyes as the Panadur leader paused.

"Let your mind be passive that I may contact and transmit to my people, they must know the entire story."

Mark complied, and instantly, as if a tremendous force had struck him, he reeled in darkness, consciousness fled. He never knew that not far behind him another being fell unconscious also. It was Palanth. The Martian had followed unseen, unwilling to let Mark risk the unknown by himself.

The hours slid in silence under the unchanging luminescence of the primordial cavern, now filled with countless Panadurs in hieratic attitudes.

At last one of the beings stood erect and made a silent motion; waves of pure energy began to course through Mark Lynn and Palanth. But when they awoke, all the Panadurs were gone save their leader. Mark dazedly stretched his long limbs and looked at the Martian uncomprehendingly, then slowly remembrance came.

"So, you did follow me after all? Disobedience of orders in an uncharted world—do you know the penalty imposed by the Council?"

"May the Council swelter in Venus' deepest swamp!" Palanth spat irreverently. "Didn't intend to take chances . . . your life's too valuable, O scourge of the Planets!" Under a grandiloquent manner he tried to hide the mixture of bewilderment and awe with which he gazed at the placid Panadur Leader. He still had not quite decided what had happened to him.

The Panadur in turn, gazed inscrutably at the being from Mars, its delicate nose

wrinkled slightly at Palanth's mingled fragrances. What went on in the Panadur's prodigious mind was unknown to the two men, for the three-foot tall Leader's mind was not in contact with theirs. The faintest hint of a smile hovered over his placid features. At last he began to send:

"The tragedy of your world, 'twice come' is only less startling than that of your Government—your leaders are a paradox! With a philosophy of achievement they conceal the greatest achievement of all—men of metal to enrich your lives; with the goal of conservation and economy, they waste the most precious of all things—Life! From such a Government, we can expect but destruction.

"Yet, your people reared without controls are dissenters. . . . I fear they might not accept our guidance, that at some future time their will to power might create an even greater problem to be solved. However, there's no alternative now. We accept the fifteen men of metal, O Terran, but above all we must have the 'Sleeping Ones' whose minds we will study. *We Panadurs must guard against a future paradox.* Your people," he paused and gazed from Mark to Palanth, "may remain."

The mental rapport was broken, and the furred leader disappeared into the depths of the cavern, leaving Mark and Palanth to retrace their steps to the *Stellar Virgin*.

FOR the first time in her highly-trained life, Lucero felt the full impact of loneliness as the European night swallowed Mark and Palanth. At last she chose action rather than endure the atavistic emotions that had begun to grip her. And methodically she fitted silently from compartment to luxurious compartment where the scientists dreamt their drugged sleep. Carefully she scanned their faces and was struck by one overwhelming fact—this was no collection of second rate scientists for the solution of routine problems, but an assemblage of the first order, now inert and helpless in the coma of Vanadol, presided over by a sphinx-like robot.

The last compartment was much larger than the preceding ones, and by far more luxurious; during the previous inspection, Mark, Palanth and herself had had no time to come this far, and the girl was

startled at its complex magnificence. Equipped for research work, it was a miracle of scientific devices, from energizing cabinets to a bewildering array of surgical apparatus and tools.

Only one man occupied it, and on the raised dais an immobile robot. But the face that Lucero bent over made her gasp with involuntary fear. It was the face of Verdugo, the infamous cerebral surgeon whose gifted fingers could change an entire ego with a few movements of the atomic scalpel.

The sight of the dreaded scientist in their midst was startling enough, but what made the girl turn ashen was the sudden flutter of the surgeon's lids. A painful groan came from his lips, as he trembled and opened his eyes. The sight of Lucero bending over him seemed to reassure him, for he smiled faintly.

Behind Lucero the towering robot glided noiselessly to peer at his awakening master. The girl was unaware it had moved.

"Shall I bring a measure of Thassalian, Master?" The metal man's richly modulated voice rose without the slightest mechanical inflection.

For one shattering instant, the girl felt as if her reason was taking wings. She remained utterly still as if in the grip of paralyzing hysteria. But her training saved her. Slowly she turned and gazed into the strangely human features of the metal giant. At close quarters she noted the smooth beryloid construction of the superb outer shell; the indestructible optics of non-abradable, chemically inert crystal with microscopic adjustments. But most important of all, she sensed that here was a brain which had attained full growth—powerful, experienced and . . . organic!

"Yes, bring me some Thassalian, *Alcoran*," the surgeon assented wearily and half-rose from his couch with a sigh. "The sleep-freeze reaction is far worse than I'd anticipated!"

"The antidotes have been given—two antidotes Master!" The super-robot answered instantly.

"Two! For the love of Terra! If it took a double antidote I must have been given a dose big enough for a Hellacorium. . ."

"Doctor Verdugo," Lucero interrupted purposely, now entirely calm. "There's life . . . intelligent life on Europa." She

didn't intend that Alcoran should have a chance to disclose what he must have known.

"Yes?" Doctor Verdugo was all attention. "Bring the Thassalian!" He waved an imperious hand at Alcoran, "and don't stand there like an effigy! Must your orders be given twice?" He glared at the robot. "Proceed, Doctor Fortun. Intelligent life . . . what's it like?"

"Humanoid, but furred against Europa's eternal cold. They seem to be telepathic!"

"Telepathic . . . Remarkable! I must have a specimen without delay. Have my scientists been awakened?"

"We've just arrived, Doctor, they're being given the antidote now," Lucero was once again her coldly efficient self.

"Your Thassalian, Master." Alcoran extended the small glass and waited while the scientist drank, closing his eyes against the ecstasy imparted by the liquor.

"Help me up!" The girl complied stifling a grimace of distaste as his arm encircled her waist. Verdugo stood on his feet with the girl's help, weaving a little, and finally recovered his balance.

"Telepathic . . ." he murmured, the light of some fiendish purpose gleaming in the coal black eyes. "Order some of my scientists to secure a specimen immediately, Doctor Fortun!" The girl bowed.

"Master . . ." Alcoran's voice was insistent. "You must. . ."

"**SILENCE!** Never use the word 'must' to me, never!" Verdugo had drawn himself to his full height. "Ever since I synthesized his brain, he's got the idea that *he* owns me! I had to order him not to stir from his seat during the entire voyage . . . I wouldn't have had any peace otherwise," he smiled at the girl and waved toward the super-robot. "I synthesized his brain from three of the finest intelligences on Terra!"

"You mean you transferred three brains to Alcoran's helmet?" She asked aghast. "But didn't they retain their memories . . . their personalities. . .?"

"Of course not, my dear. I never do things by halves. And now I must inform the Council we have arrived, and the discovery of life on Europa." He walked toward the immense metal wall and his slender hand reached out to touch a spot.

Silently, the huge metal partition rose upwards revealing a hidden alcove in the very center of which, taking up about two-thirds of the available space stood a gigantic machine.

"A Tele-Magnum!" Lucero breathed.

"Alcoran, contact Venus . . . the Council Hall," Doctor Verdugo ordered his super-robot. The latter came noiselessly forward. Once seated at the console of the incredibly complex mechanism, his agile finger ran without hesitation over the banked keys, after pressing a master switch that lighted serried ranks of powerful tubes, with an eerie violet light.

"Give my orders to my scientists, Doctor Fortun—it is imperative I have an European specimen immediately." Doctor Verdugo made a curious grimace that accentuated the evil expression stamped on his features, then he nodded in dismissal.

With a great effort Lucero quieted her swirling thoughts. She had no doubt but that the super-robot knew about the administration of Vanadol. If Verdugo learned of it, he would instantly report it to the Council, and at least part of the fleet would come to investigate. Against the fleet of Terra they were powerless.

"I'll not deserve this world and freedom if I fail now!" She told herself. White-faced and grim she began to carry out a plan that was slowly growing in her mind out of sheer desperation. Once again she retraced her steps from compartment to compartment, and began motivating each robot, commanding them to administer the sleep-freeze to the men and women in the lower tiers. One robot she left, the one in the compartment next to that of Doctor Verdugo—she had a task for that one.

When all the robots save one had been sent below, she went back and entered the next to the last compartment.

"Arise and come with me," she ordered the robot. "I'm your master, you will obey my orders implicitly." The metal monster stirred, as if some hidden mechanism had come to life at the vibration of her words. It arose on frictionless bearings and stood glittering before her; she opened its breast and inspected the masterly work that had been done on the control panel; its eyes, lit now by the glow of intelligence seemed uncannily human. Lucero knew this specimen didn't possess the Machiavellian intel-

ligence of Alcoran—only Verdugo could accomplish such a satanic piece of work—but it was larger and more powerful than Alcoran, the latter being a specialized product for intricate mental work.

Resolutely Lucero marched to Doctor Verdugo's compartment, followed by the fearful metal servant. The scientist had already completed preparations for a vivisection when the girl entered, and was bending over a multitude of helixes of finest wire of sensitized silver.

An array of electric and atomic-powered instruments from tiny, silver-like scalpels, to razor-sharp saws gleamed on tables at his sides; fulgurants cast ultra-visibility light upon the white-swathed couch where the victim was to be strapped alive. Verdugo did not hear them enter, but Alcoran did! Instantly the super-robot gave a warning cry at the sight of his metal counterpart and stood before the girl and robot like an impassable wall.

"Attack!" Lucero did not waste words. "Destroy it!" She pointed to the slightly crouching Alcoran.

VII

WITH a blasting roar the girl's robot lunged, and Alcoran sprang forward to meet the attack. It was a nerve shattering impact, like that of two armored prehistoric monsters engaged in a death-struggle.

Behind the metal men, both Lucero and Verdugo maneuvered for position, their atomo-pistols blazing a path through scientific instruments and furnishings as they fired over and around the struggling robots. The awesome din of the gigantic battle was deafening, as the compartment was slowly converted into shambles.

Once Alcoran managed to grip the leg of Lucero's robot and the latter went crashing against the vivisection table, instantly pulverizing it. But with a leap that carried it half across the vast alcove, the robot charged Alcoran like a battering-ram and driving him into the Tele-Magnum room with the impetus of his leap. The explosion of shattered tubes and crashing metal, the singing hum of ripped berlyloy and pulverized plastro, was drowned by the clang and thud of the gigantic bodies as they strove to wrench each other apart.

And now, only the litter-strewn floor was between Lucero and Verdugo, the latter oozing blood from a seared shoulder where an atomoblast had touched. Deliberately she aimed her atomo-pistol, even as the surgeon simultaneously raised his, but her blast only disintegrated a fulgurant on the ceiling, while Verdugo's fatal pencil of violet light speared an empty spot, for at that instant the hurtling form of Alcoran spewed from the alcove, barely grazing the girl, but such was the terrific force of his passage that it knocked her spinning against the wall where she collapsed.

Behind Alcoran, hurtling like an avenging angel, Lucero's robot came charging with but one thought—destruction.

"Alcoran!" It was Verdugo shouting hoarsely at his creation, now spread-eagled on the floor. "Run, follow me!" He dived for the passageway as Alcoran, damaged as he was, his brain shaken by the terrific concussion arose and sped after him.

At the sight of the fallen girl, Lucero's robot checked his rush, hesitated and finally bent over her. He raised the still form as if it were a feather and stood for a moment as if trying to cerebrated. Finally it deposited her with infinite care on the couch where Verdugo had slept. Then it began to search what cabinets had not been destroyed, for a stimulant.

It found the decanter of Thessalian, that miraculously had escaped destruction; gently opening the girl's mouth the robot poured a few drops down her throat. Just then Mark Lynn and Palanth burst into the room. Shamble was before their eyes. Mark went white with apprehension and leaped to Lucero's side, but the robot placed a formidable metal hand against the earthman's chest and growled:

"Back, Terran! Come no nearer!"

PALANTH slid toward them atomo-pistol in hand, just as Mark drew his. But at that moment Lucero opened her eyes and groaned softly.

"Mark!" There was a universe of gladness in her cry. She waved a limp hand toward the robot. "This is Mark Lynn and the other's Palanth—your masters also, obey them."

The robot stepped back and Mark kneeled at her side. "Are you hurt, my

darling?" Lucero shook her head and tried to smile.

Palanth turned to the robot. "Tell us what occurred in detail," he commanded. Thus it was that from the metal lips they heard the entire story with photographic accuracy, as far as he had seen.

"I might have known they'd have one last counter-check," Mark reproached himself. "I should never have left you!"

"Who could have foreseen this?" Lucero raised herself on an elbow. "Even I had no idea that Verdugo was with us, not to speak of his bringing one of the only two ultra-specialized super-robots in existence. We'll have to work very fast, Mark! There's nothing, literally nothing, that Alcoran cannot accomplish in a scientific way, provided he has the materials—Verdugo may even have him build a Tele-Magnum and communicate with the Council!"

"But where's he going to get materials, my dear? A Tele-Magnum is a tall order!"

"I don't know. . . . But I do know that Verdugo has the mind of a fiend and the skill of a genius, and Alcoran's a triple-synthesized brain, and under Verdugo's control!"

"We'll deal with the surgeon," Palanth's voice was deadly.

"And we shall deal with Verdugo and his scientists," came the quiet telepathic thought.

Both Mark Lynn and the Maritan turned seeking its source, and saw framed in the doorway to the alcove, the silver-furred figure of the Panadur leader.

"That was the agreement," the Panadur added after a pause. "Thousands of my people await without to carry him away."

Lucero's robot took a step forward tentatively and then gazed questioningly at its mistress, and suddenly a wave of energy from the Panadur stopped it dead in its tracks.

"The agreement will be honored," Mark acquiesced, "but one has escaped, O Panadur, and Klonos knows where in that maze of rocks and caverns he's now hiding with his super-robot."

"That's our problem, Terran. The agreement was five-hundred, and five-hundred scientists shall we have."

"You will need the fifteen robots immediately," Mark said thoughtfully. "Lucero, my dear, only you can command the robots,

so place fifteen under the Panadur's command. . . . are you able to walk?"

"Of course, I was only stunned." She rose from the couch and left the compartment followed by her ever-watchful metal man. The Panadur seemed to melt away as it glided into the hall.

"And now," Mark addressed Palanth, "we must begin to land the spacers, I have the radio beam. The sooner everyone has been given the sleep-freeze antidote, the better. Internationals first, they are our best fighters, just in case the Council has another trick up its sleeve. Then we must find some way of increasing the spacers' resistance to the disintegrating beam—the alloy used on robots' case shell is the clue—they're impervious to atom-blast. Weather stations next—robots to be detailed on that and machinery stations to turn out mechanical robots and more machinery . . . tools, weapons for defense . . . we're really fighting for time."

"I know. But even then, I can think of nothing that can stop Terra's fleet if it ever comes to Europa. It's practically invulnerable, or Venus and my own Mars would have shaken off the Council's domination long ago!"

"I have an idea Palanth! It's far from clear, but if it works . . . It has to do with radiant energy—even the Fleet couldn't withstand that."

"Radiant energy! Have you lost your mind? Who can control a radiant energy vortex? Besides, we have no means of releasing it. Stop dreaming Mark!"

"It isn't a dream," Mark shrugged wide shoulders. "But come, let's take a look at the scientific exodus—I'm certainly glad to be rid of them, hope the Panadurs can cope with that tribe."

"What do you suppose the Panadurs really want with them, Mark?"

"Probe their minds of course. Panadurs have surpassing intellects, but they have neither tools nor scientific techniques. I suppose they want to learn all they can from our 'sleeping beauties,' in order to achieve their own inventions. Panadurs are thumbless, unable to make tools, thus their development has been purely along mental lines. Since their metabolism requires no food, as they are able to absorb energy directly, they have by-passed all domestic arts and sciences.

The steadily increasing noise from the tiers below, had now become a cacophonous din, as more and more Internationals came to life.

THE PANADUR LEADER bending over a scientist for the nth time, probed, delved and searched the innermost recesses of the quiescent brain under the scalpel, but at last he straightened with a baffled expression.

The European cavern was a vast catacomb under the glaucous radiance of the radio-active walls that spread a green stela on the faces of the sleeping scientists, flanking the walls in lengthening rows.

The Panadur knew what had been done, he had even tried the delicate process, but the secret of transferring a living brain, minus its personality and the seat of entity, remained unsolved.

Not one of the scientists brought from the *Stellar Virgin* possessed the secret technique, and many Panadurs had sacrificed themselves in vain as their brains died under the atomo-knife.

Presently the Panadur Leader raised his delicate face, the brilliance of his eyes increased as he turned to face the tunnel that led to the cavern's entrance, then the single thought flashed out: "*Enter!*"

It wasn't long until the silence was broken by the tread of heavy-shod feet crunching the glittering oxide crystals, and Mark entered followed by Palanth. The awful responsibility for three-hundred million lives and the transfiguration of a world, had left its mark on the faces of the two men.

"We bring bad news, Panadur!" Mark said bluntly, in his preoccupation he unconsciously resorted to speech. "One of the space vessels has been looted of vital supplies that can be used for the construction of an inter-planetary radio. Verdugo took the opportunity to steal its radio installations with the aid of his robot, while the passengers celebrated their arrival on Europa. If Verdugo builds a Tele-Magnum and contacts the Council, it means War!"

"And war," Palanth seconded, "means the Terran Fleet, against which we are not prepared!"

"When were the supplies stolen?"

"Three revolutions of Panadur on its

axis ago—we learned of it today. Enough time for Alcoran to have built an instrument powerful enough to contact the Council on Venus."

"The blame is partly ours," the Panadur telepathed sadly. "We should have captured Verdugo long ago. But it meant wasting lives to imprison that madman . . . but now, we have no recourse, the scientist and his metal servant will be brought in. It will solve another problem," he added thoughtfully. "This!" He indicated the trepanned cranium of the scientist on the operating table.

"If you need them, Panadur, you may have every robot in our possession," Mark offered.

For an instant the nearest thing to a smile the two men had ever seen, crossed the features of the strange being of Europa.

"Panadur thanks you, Terran. But we already have built over a thousand robots, half of them have mechanical brains and can be radio-controlled, but the other half, the important one requires a knowledge of Verdugo's technique for transplanting organic brains to metal men. He shall provide that . . . personally!"

"Once long ago," Mark spoke meditatively, "you slew an enemy of mine with a volume of energy like a bolt of lightning, then you somehow transferred the latent energy of that being to me. *Could that been radiant energy?*" He paused. "Could it, O Panadur?"

But the European had abruptly interposed an impenetrable barrier between his mind and that of the two men. With an imperious gesture he pointed to the exit of the cavern. Mark and Palanth gazed at each other in bewilderment, finally they left in silence.

As soon as they were lost to view, the cavern began to be filled by a steady stream of thousands upon thousands of silvery Panadurs silently filing in from the inner caverns.

"WHAT in Phobos happened to him?" Mark thought aloud, trying to understand the incomprehensible conduct of the Panadur Leader.

"Don't ask me riddles about this fantastic race of beings!" Palanth exclaimed irritably, waving his handkerchief. "What

has radiant energy got to with them anyway?"

"Just a hunch of mine, Palanth. If the energy they absorb from minerals is radiant energy . . . well, we might be able to defy the Terran Fleet itself . . . if!"

"You still speak in riddles, O Thou specially not wanted!" Palanth lapsed into his usual grandiloquent manner. "At any rate, your idea of fighting the Terran Fleet with radiant energy certainly had a startling effect on that mysterious biped of yours." He pressed still another offensively perfumed handkerchief to his face and eyed the changing landscape of Europa with distaste. It was a raw panorama of great tracts of vivid red soil, exposed by the melting snows; outcrops of glittering rocks rich in minerals flashed in rainbow hues under the powerful ultra-visibility reflectors that were substituting for Terra's Sol. In the near distance, gigantic skeletal structures were a babel of sound, and beyond, the mile-high weather control towers fought steadily the numbing cold.

"Must I explain in words of one syllable so that dubious intellect of yours can absorb it?" Mark asked mockingly. "Well, while asking the Panadur about radiant energy, *I had in mind* building thousands of tiny spacers out of some of the Spacer Transports that brought us here. These tiny swarms are to be filled with *radiant energy* and aimed by mechanical robot control directly at the Terran Fleet so that they will explode on contact, annihilating everything in their path. Thus lives will be conserved. . . . *But the radiant energy must come from the Panadurs!*"

"Too many ifs," Palanth replied unconvinced. "However, we can have a fleet of miniature spacers ready before the Council's butchers get within a million parsecs of Europa.

"But without either your damned radiant energy or some explosive that will do what no explosive has ever done before, or ray either, for that matter, the ships will be as useless as . . . as a Panadur in a fight!"

"*Build the fleet!*" came the startling telepathic command from the direction of the cavern country.

"He . . . It was in contact!" Palanth gazed at Mark Lynn startled.

"He always is," Mark held up the gleaming blue, star-like gem he carried in his

pocket. "Probably appreciated your complimentary remark about the fighting qualities of Panadurs. But that's what I wanted to hear him say!" He exulted. "Hold up everything Palanth, and throw all our resources into the building of the miniature fleet."

"Yeah! But let's not forget to get the remaining spacers into shape just in case. . . . I'd much rather die exploding on a Terran spacer, than trapped like a Martian desert rat on Europa."

"Patience, O Spawn of unfortunate begetting!" Mark taunted his friend with one of the latter's favorite insults. "Everything in good time."

As their Spacer came into view in the distance, Mark increased his speed unconsciously as he thought of Lucero.

VIII

HIS EYES were expressionless, his ego inert, but with the incredible dexterity of genius and long practice, Doctor Verdugo transferred the brains of drugged scientists to the waiting rows of perfected robots.

The bolt of living energy that had dropped the infamous Terran surgeon in the recesses of an European cavern, had neutralized his will, and his egocentric and sadistic personality no longer dominated his brain.

Now his flying fingers manipulated atomic scalpels without hesitation, and one by one scientific brains were short of certain areas, without impairing them. Silently he coupled the organic demi-brains with the mechanical motor organs of the robots, by means of nerve tendrils that led out of the brains themselves, and were curled into coils about which he placed helixes of sensitized silver wire, that made them virtually transformers—nervous impulses into electrical and vice versa.

The miracle that was Alcoran, the super-robot, was being multiplied five-hundred fold, as each scientific hostage provided a brain to activate the new super-robots of the Pandurs.

Alcoran itself had been operated upon to remove certain allegiances and memories and now, under the direct control of the Panadur leader, assisted the doctor in the operations.

The Panadur leader watched expressionless as the work went on ceaselessly, inexorably until every scientific brain was housed in a metal man.

Finally, at a telepathic command from their leader, the Panadurs began to carry the cadavers of the scientists away—their energy potential must not be wasted—the need for energy would be great. And then, an uncanny, a hair-raising scene took place.

As if felled by a blow, Doctor Verdugo collapsed prone upon the now empty operation table, and Alcoran detaching himself from among the newly activated robots, grasped instruments and began to operate.

Stranger still, a Panadur silently lay down by the side of the scientist and relaxed as if in death.

Doctor Verdugo's cranium was trepanned and opened, Alcoran deftly extracted the brain operating with the mastery that had been Verdugo's. Then he opened the brain pan of the Panadur and removed certain parts from its alien brain, including the pituitary at the apex, which seemed enormous in comparison with the size of the Panadur's brain, and grafted it to what had been the brain of Doctor Verdugo. Then as a swarm of Panadurs dragged a robot forward, he inserted the organic brain in the super-robot's helmet, made the necessary connections, completed the task and sealed the incision. Verdugo's body was carried away. The same swarm of Panadurs circled the super-robot, and began to generate energy potential which they transmitted to the quiescent brain in its metal head.

Slowly, the superb metal man rose from the table and with slender, delicate hands grasped its head. Its brilliant beryl eyes of purest indestructible crystal, glowed in the chiseled semi-triangular face. Suddenly it raised its head and gazed straight at the Panadur leader, and as if it had received a command, it bowed silently. Then, with the lithe, cat-like stride of the Panadurs it headed for the exit of the Cavern and was gone.

An expression of triumph exalted the Leader's features. "Hereafter," he thought, "the energy output to control robots' brains telepathically, will not be necessary. *They could be rendered telepathic!*"

It was then the Leader turned majestically toward the cavern's depths and is-

sued his final command to the waiting legions of his people. The robots with the mechanical brains, nearly a thousand strong, marched forward, and, behind them, rank upon rank of the countless furry Panadurs.

Once outside in the artificial sunlight of Europa, only the myriad bullet-shaped, miniature spacers flashing in the golden light, drew their eyes. The distant rows of tiny, waiting ships drew robots and Panadurs alike like a magnet and the immense army of silver-gray beings with a vanguard of metal men swept forward, eerily silent.

WITHIN the Stellar Virgin, Mark Lynn paced the confines of what had been Verdugo's chamber. The Tele-Magnum, repaired and rebuilt could be seen in the small alcove. Mark's face was gray and haggard as he faced Lucero and Palanth, seated on a couch against the wall.

"No word from the Panadur Leader, and we cannot wait much longer! If my calculations are right, the Terran Fleet should be nearing Europa's orbit. We cannot afford to be caught on the ground."

"Do you suppose the Council would listen?" It was Palanth hoping against hope. "Try them, Mark; we can spar for time." Then in sheer desperation: "I told you, Terran, those bipeds would never come through with that infernal radiant energy!" His features also showed the strain he'd gone through, even the ubiquitous handkerchief was missing.

"I will!" Mark had reached a decision. "But no mercy can be expected from them, I'll have to handle it *my way*. . . ." He broke off and walked to the Tele-Magnum, followed by Lucero and Palanth. Outside, an immense multitude of Terrans awaited orders.

Mark Lynn sat down at the console and manipulated the controls, his fingers danced over the console keys until the eerie glow of swirling colors and the ascending whine of the instrument told him he had the required power. Scene after scene rushed on and off the tele-panel until finally Venus City flashed into view. Mark made minute adjustments and increased the potential—at last the inner Council Chamber was revealed.

It was filled to overflowing with scien-

tists of the highest order. An atmosphere of excitement pervaded it as experts of various categories rushed in and out with their calculations and reports. They were electrified as the scene within the Spacer was flashed on their gigantic tele-panel. Mark waited an instant before he spoke, as the holy of holies subsided into utter silence.

"Europa," he said with complete aplomb, "greet the Council. "A free Europa offers peace. Soon the Terran Fleet will have reached our new world, and that Fleet will not return to Venus! Before it is too late, before the inter-planetary void becomes the scene of a gigantic hecatomb, we ask you, *turn your fleet back* before it is too late!"

There was an interval of stunned, disbelieving silence. Within the memory of all present such a speech had never been heard. Such insolence was so utterly unthinkable, that the scientists stood grotesquely open-mouthed. Then in a rising tide of fury pandemonium broke loose.

"Traitor!" Was the universal cry. "Apostate, blasphemer!" From among the scientific swarm that had completely forgotten their dignity, a tall, white-bearded scientist detached himself and raising both arms roared: "Silence! The Master will speak!" The pandemonium ceased like a receding storm. Mark Lynn waited. Contemptuously he eyed the sleek bodies clothed in costly raiment, the bejeweled fingers and cruel faces. A wave of revulsion swept over him as he remembered what countless millions had suffered at their hands. And as he waited, a deep, magnificently modulated voice broke the stillness:

"*You offer peace!*" Low, sardonic laughter slashed like a scimitar. "Peace I shall grant you earthing . . . in the *power reserve!* You and that addled female who has betrayed her scientist's oath, and that foppish Martian who even dares to ape my robes. To the rest of the dissenters, conditioning by the controls and rigid supervision for fifteen years. Those who are immune to controls, shall be condemned to power reserve."

He paused as if relishing the effect of words that sealed a planet's doom. Then: "As for those humanoid creatures with silver furs Doctor Verdugo mentioned in

his message, we have already planned their orbit of *achievement* . . . that is," the satanic chuckle rose again, "for the ones we spare to serve, the rest shall be disposed of properly."

The unseen speaker's voice ceased, as if there were nothing more to be said.

In the momentary silence the voice of a robot boomed behind him:

"Master, a messenger from Panadur!"

MARK LYNN whirled and saw a new type of robot, whose delicate features resembled uncannily those of the beings of Europa. Its beryl eyes regarded him steadily as it stood motionless flanked by two robot guards. Then Mark received the telepathic message flashing from the super-robot's brain:

"I, Leader of Panadur, have attended to represent my People."

For an instant Mark wondered if the Leader had somehow transferred his own brain to the metal man, for some obscure purpose of his own, but telepathically, he was reassured.

"The metal man's brain relays my thoughts only. It is a vehicle, nothing more, and can convey speech when the need shall arise."

"War is imminent, Panadur," he telepathed, knowing that the Council could not receive his thoughts. "Without radiant energy we're doomed to failure." But from the super-robot came no answer. Mark Lynn whirled to face the Tele-Magnum again, and his voice rang true with contemptuous assurance.

"You're dreaming, *Benevolence!* My offer was merely to prevent needless slaughter. Your hour of domination has passed. When your Terran Fleet reaches the orbit of Europa, it will disintegrate, leaving you and your cruel henchmen helpless to enforce your vandal rule on Mars and Venus; a tidal wave of retribution will sweep you out of the planetary colonies. Europa is and will remain free. Your despotic rule has come to an end. This is your *last* chance for peace!"

"You are mad!" There was a terrible anger in the voice of the Supreme Ruler. "Mad. . . . Do you think for an instant that I would send the entire Terran Fleet to your puny satellite? A mere section

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of a thousand ships will be enough to blast your blaspheming minions off its frozen wastes. But enough of this, in less than an hour our ships will be above you and death shall be swift!" The Tele-Screen went blank.

"I can stay no longer, my men await me." Palanth rose abruptly and left the chamber. He hurried to his flagship that led a section of what remained of the great Spacers that had brought them to Europa.

"My bluff has failed," Mark said quietly to Lucero, and his face was drained of all color. "Go to the Panadur caverns, my dear, they may be able to provide safety for you. I have only one course of action left."

Lucero shook her lovely head. "We began together, we shall end that way." There was unshakable determination in her quiet, husky voice. "Go and give the necessary orders . . . it . . . it . . ." her voice broke slightly, "has been a glorious adventure, Mark!" He kissed her with infinite tenderness and tore himself away.

Once in the control room, his tones were hard as beryloy as he issued command after command, and the gigantic spacers rose in a crescendo of sound toward the trackless void. He knew the ships had been rendered as formidable as was within their power, but even that was not enough, and the knowledge that countless millions faced certain death became a terrible anger and desperation within him.

THE European Fleet in battle formation, assumed a staggered triangle, in tiers of ships that rendered it a three-dimensional wedge. Powerful super-armored spacers formed the frontal line, while the spacers they had been able to equip with atomic projectors guarded the sides, ready to meet encirclement. At the very apex rode the Stellar Virgin, with Palanth's sectional flagship the *Hellacorium* one tier beneath. It was a magnificent sight, and viewing it through the Tele-Magnum, Mark had a momentary lift of pride.

"Connect three-dimensional telecast," Mark ordered the robot, and instantly the telepanel showed a scene as if it were an open window on the heavens. In the distance racing at unimaginable speed, the Terran Fleet flashed on majestically.

Breathlessly, the watchers on two worlds eyed its inexorable approach. Suddenly,

from the vanguard of the Terran Fleet a pencil of livid light speared an European Spacer, and the great transport seemed to disintegrate in space. Mark's knuckles were white as they tightened.

"Maneuver and blast!" He roared into the radio, and in unison, but with vertiginous speed the Europa fleet became a single perpendicular line that spewed atom-blast in an awesome holocaust. But the Terran Fleet came on unscathed. Simultaneously converging beams of livid light shot out from its foremost cruisers and a score of European Spacers crumbled into dust. In desperation a flight of them hurled themselves suicidally against the driving Terran Fleet, and whorls of incandescence illumined the ghastly scene, and it was then that Mark saw several shattered Terran Spacers spinning down.

"We have no chance!" Mark gritted as he saw the European Spacers disintegrated in the awful struggle. "Murderers! . . . We'll hurl all our remaining spacers against the Terran Fleet; if that's the only way to shatter them, that's the way it'll be!" As he was about to give the fateful command, the Panadur super-robot, who had accompanied them, lay a restraining metal hand on Mark Lynn's arm:

"Wait!" He exclaimed laconically, and pointed to the three-dimensional Tele-cast. He flicked a tiny lever and made delicate adjustments. As if seen through an ultra-powerful telescope, a vast swarm of silver specs were rising from Europa itself. With dazzling speed many times greater than that of the Spacers, the darting miniatures grew in size. Presently they reached the battle scene, and like metal hornets were darting among the intermingled fleets, as if seeking their prey.

From thousands of projectors of the Terran Fleet, a myriad scintillating beams crossed and criss-crossed the void like cosmic fingers, but the tiny ships in an unexpected maneuver, excited with dazzling speed, had scattered, skimming, darting, swooping like silver hawks, spreading like an immense net over and beneath the Terran ships. Now, they aimed themselves with unerring accuracy at the battle-giants of the Council.

Dozens disappeared into puffs of brilliant light as the Terran beams found their mark, but as the flagship of the Terran

Fleet maneuvered into position to annihilate the on-coming swarm, a single silver miniature crashed squarely against its nose. As if a meteor had exploded in space, there was a burst of intolerable light blinding the watchers, and just as they were able to see again, a salvo of crashes became a flaming incandescence that human eyes could never record.

When at last the awesome scene had ceased, and they were able to open their tortured eyes, the void was empty but for a pitiful remnant fleeing pell-mell from an enemy that became a living projectile and crashed suicidally against their ships with immediate annihilation to both. A few silver bullets pursued them relentlessly until distance swallowed them.

IN THEIR European ships, now being tossed like leaves in a storm, no one spoke. There were no words in human throats that could shatter the brooding silence in two worlds.

Even the sight of a thin, towering old man, whose despotic face was blanched as he gazed from the balcony above the Council Chamber, was not enough to bring back their speech. The head of the Council, the Supreme Ruler had shown himself for the first time in history!

"Fiends!" He croaked in a voice that trembled with shocked unbelief. "Demons! What manner of beings have you on Europa that their bodies can shatter the Council's fleet? For this your world shall be destroyed—utterly destroyed!"

"With what?" It was the Panadur Leader speaking through his robot. "Listen, O Man of evil! The five-hundred scientists you sent to our world, no longer exist. Their minds activate such robots as you have never even imagined. Verdugo is a robot himself—the robot whose voice you are listening to, as my telepathic commands reach its brain. You saw my people hurling themselves against your might and dissolving into *radiant energy*, which we absorb directly from matter as you absorb energy from food. We can store it in our bodies, increasing it into a potential which can be directed at will and released with cumulative force. Nothing in our universe can withstand that—and we're willing to die by the million that Panadur may be free!"

"We shall make treaties with Mars and Venus, to permit the millions of Terrans to dwell on their Planets until we can provide habitation for them elsewhere. In the meantime, take your choice, old man! Your terror-reign is ended. We give you the choice of the radiant death, or a space ship to take you and your vermin beyond the inner planets. You will be provided with whatever you need—but the Council must go forever!"

The Supreme Ruler realized defeat. He had never granted mercy—he expected none. His arms hung limp at his sides, and his head with its smoldering, hatred-filled eyes hung on his aged chest. He gazed at the stunned assembly of scientists below him and knew there was no escape.

If he defied Mark Lynn and the Panadurs, the Terran Fleet would be utterly destroyed and without that safeguard, Mars and Venus would sweep them off their planets. Everywhere his thoughts turned he only saw death. And, as the power he had held for years slipped from his grasp, he became a gray, broken old man who knew fear.

"We will go, International!" He flung with one final sneer, as the hatred of a trapped beast flamed in his eyes.

AS MARK LYNN manipulated the keys and cut the connection, he found a warm body being pressed against his, and a tear-wet face that burrowed beneath his chin. His arms went about Lucero.

"Crying, indeed! Where is the dignity of a scientist, Doctor Fortun?" He smiled with a vast tenderness.

"Damn scientists," she exclaimed inelegantly, and burrowed deeper. "All I want is to be a woman, Mark!"

At that moment the telepanel lighted signaling and Mark connected again. It was Palanth.

"Mark! Mark!" His face was alight with triumph. But Mark did not answer, for a new dawn was rising in his heart, and Lucero's lips were pressed to his.

The Martian went silent, scowled for a moment and shrugged his shoulders, then pressed a square of Venusian silk to his supercilious nose in order to hide a spreading grin.

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THE VIZIGRAPH

"Clear ether, Vizifanners!" which is to say "Goodbye, and good sailing to this issue." For when you read this, the newest book of **PLANET STORIES** will be taking shape.

We rather like the Phoenix-like process of creating a new issue of a magazine, for to us, at least, it is not a bundle of pages clipped together, but is a thing of personality. Hours of creative effort going into the writing of the stories and the drawing of the illustrations. Other hours go into the actual physical construction—and more hours are consumed later on, when you readers pore over the pages.

There is something personal in that, something more than a mere task—and we hope that you find many minutes of pleasure from the hours of work which we have done in bringing this issue to you.

Aside from that, we think you'll like the group of letters we've selected for you this issue. Ridiculous to the sublime, and vice-versa; we've brought them all. Read them, be amused or interested—then write us your own. This is your department, and we want you to use it. Remember, tho, three typed double-spaced pages are the limit. Write more—and watch them get cut.

But before we go, we just want to let the following know that they have originals coming from the May issue of **PLANET STORIES**, if they'll drop us a card, indicating their choice. 1—Leonard Marlow; 2—James R. Gray; 3—Milt Lesser.

CHAD SHRINKS (?)

3956 Ledgewood,
Cincinnati, Ohio

DEAR EDITOR:

Not in the least conceited over snaring second place in La Vizi, our Loon Lad remains the same sweet, unspoiled boy of yesteryear, and once more, as in the past, he delights in romping merrily through the hallowed and sacred pages of deah, deah PS. Without further ado (loud cheers from the gallery on that statement), our legendary hero toddles on to a report on the Fall **PLANET**.

As is customary, my grim scrutiny falls first upon that which graces PS's exterior, the cover; otherwise known as haul-out-the-ray-gats, — Joe; — the-monsters-are-after-your-sweetie-again. Well, much as I shrink from admitting the fact, I liked Rozen's latest effort very much. The background is nice and not lurid, the Ship is cold and desolate, the cave-boys are nice and gory looking, the hero looks like an Ovaltine ad, and the girl . . . ah, the girl! I must confess that if you must have gals on the cover, I much prefer them to look like this. A great improvement over the infamous firm of DS&A. (Drake, Saunders, and Anderson.) Rozen is definitely here to stay. But I am still waiting for a Paul or Finlay cover. Ah, youth and its lost and shattered dreams . . .

With a feeble tap on a drum and a weak toot on a rusty bugle, we come once more to the fictional contents of PS.

First place goes to Clifford D. Simak's excellent "Message



From Mars," a really outstanding story. Not only did Simak give us a tale with a *plot* rather than a hodge-podge of incidents, but he gave us some really credible characters. And he treated us to that rarest of the rare thrills—no unwarranted love interest. Let's see much, much more of Simak in the future, along with some other old-time authors. Via the renowned 1 to 10 rating system, invented and copyrighted by Chad "Loon Lad" Oliver and five million other guys, Mr. Simak gets a hefty 9.9/2.

Following not too far behind the first-place yarn comes our old pal, Nelson S. Bond, with one of his better efforts. Bond certainly has his ups and downs, but this time he was definitely UP. "Phantom Out of Time" is one of those stories that holds one engrossed from first word to last. Granted, much of the conversation was overly melodramatic and reeked of corn, but said fact did not, in my opinion, materially detract from the story. Perhaps it even served to make it stronger, by enabling Bond to put his ideas across with greater ease and clarity. Henceforth, let's try to keep Mr. Bond UP instead of vice-versa. He's too good an author to waste on corn. 9.8.

Leigh Brackett, who always seems to place among the top three, does it again with "Thralls of the Endless Night." I'll leave the tearing apart of this yarn to someone else, but I will mention that whoever was responsible for that hideous title should join the firm of DS&A in complete oblivion. It was *terrible!*

Next, "Prey of the Space Falcon," by Ye Editore. Very good, though that plot was rather . . . uh . . . shall we say, "time-worn"? Good handling was all that saved it. By the way, now that you have written a yarn about Gene Hunter, "The Space Falcon," I demand that your next story be entitled "The Revenge of Loon Lad" or something to that effect. 9.5.

Henry Hasse takes the number five spot with his "Revenge of the Vera." It gets 9.2.

"Mutiny in the Void," by Charles R. Tanner, comes next. It was a clever, well-written story, and more from this author would fit in very nicely to counterbalance the heavy science and blood 'n' thunder. 9.

Last place, I sadly relate, goes to Carl Jacobi and his "Assignment to Venus." I think that Jacobi is working hard and has the makings, so hang on to him. He just needs practice. 7.5.

At this point, I'd like to clarify my stand on love interest in PS. I don't object to a love interest, IF it is adult, IF it is well-handled, and IF it has a reason for being in the story. I DO object to pulp heroines, an entirely different thing from love interest. You know—Dear, sweet, lovable, innocent Mary Ann gets abducted by the hard, cruel space pirate and is being slowly roasted over a blasting rocket tube when Our Hero dashes in, mutters something like, "Oh, you dirty cat, you!" shoots the whole mob of pirates and rescues Mary Ann, after which—oh well, you know the rest.

As for the artwork this time, I couldn't find any. The Leydenfrost boys flopped. However, they take first and second places, purely because there was no competition whatsoever. Doolin lacks every requisite of a science-fiction artist, including imagination. As for Rubimor . . . Well, I have written a poem. It's long, but don't you *dare* cut it!

NEVERMORE OF RUBIMOR!

Creeping, slinking into our magazine,
Quietly slithering, completely unseen,
Out of the darkness, out of the night,
Comes Rubimor—the new PLANET blight.

Upon first glimpse, I let out a scream—
Could even an editor be so utterly mean?
I ran for the woods—quick as a bee,
To find my art critic—a bird in a tree.

Large, ebony black, and sinister was he
Perched on his limb, staring at me.
With feverish fingers I opened PS,
Shuddering anew o'er Rubimor's mess.

The bird was a raven, wise with eagle-eye;
He shuddered—seemed as horrified as was I.
He peered solemnly at the work of Rubimor;
Quoth the raven—"Nevermore."

And I, O Editore, do definitely agree—
Quoth the Loon Lad—"No more for me."
Pray thee, Wilbur, do not be sore—
But remember the raven—*nevermore!*

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Cheer up, folks, I'm almost done. Only La Vizi remains.

My sincere thanks to everyone who was kind enough to vote for me in the PLANET Sweepstakes. It would be both silly and futile to pretend that I am not flattered by the honor. And thanks, also, to the editor and his staff who make it possible for there to be such a contest. But now—on to The Big Three.

First, after much thought, goes to Vaughan Ralf Heiner, mainly because I like his remarks pertaining to Cummings. Viva! Next, Leonard Marlow, not because I agree with him, but because he comes out and says what he thinks. Good. Third, a tie between Paul Carter and Milt Lesser, both of whom had excellent letters. Also, Jay Chidsey, James Russel Gray, and Sarge de Pina deserve at least a lusty pat on the back. Tough luck, men—high competition this trip.

If Wilms Herbert would climb down off his high-horse, he would get something, too. As it is . . . oh well, perhaps I'm merely making mountains out of mole-hills.

In conclusion, I wish Termite Rowles would wreak his Curse of Cummings on *me*. A new Cummings yarn every week? Brother, that's not any curse—it's a gosh-darned blessing!

Sincerely,

CHAD OLIVER,

The Looney Lad of Ledgewood.

THE DROOLING DRIP!

1219 N. E. Roselawn,
Portland, Oregon.

DEAR EDITOR:

"Magnificent," murmured the Martian Mauler as he gazed fondly at his latest puncture victim. "I put my *awl* into it."

Ah, I could almost write a poem about the cover on the Fall Issue of PS; as a matter of fact, I will.

"Muscular hero, feminine femme,
Purty black background, no BEM."

Say, is that dame wearing a bathing-suit under the cigar-wrapper? Or did Charles R. tan 'er? Bootyful, simply bootyful. (Meaning the cover, of course.)

POTSF. Why, Wilbur S.I. "Calling Gene Hunter!" Write "The Prey of the Asinine One" next, yes? "No!" (While I'm at it, I will now introduce my new rating system. Just count the drool-spots after you read the story. The more drools, the better the story. (POTSF gets seven drools—good.)

POOT by Bond gets eight drools. Well written, but I wouldn't plant onions in that plot. (Even green *Plut*-onions.) The —er—illustration gets one drool. (For the dame.)

MFm by Simak gets seven drools. The Martian lilies were a little obvious. The illustration? Doo(d)lin' gets minus one drool.

TOTEN by Brackett rates ten drools. (Ghastly rating system, isn't it?) Wilms Herbert, take heed. This Brackettette had FOUR DIMENSIONS. The pic gets four drools, but Junior isn't as good as his Poppa.

("How did you get so cold, Henry?")

("I leid-in-frost.")

The short-stories get six drools each. Doolin's pics are worth five. Too much Doolin this issue. Bring back Paul, Bok, and Fox. Dolgov would also be welcome.

To win pix, the Vizifanners write *humus* letters. (Left out the "or" 'cause most of the fans are minors, anyhow.) *Ita scribo epistulam humorosam*. (Humorosa does not mean "humorous." It means "all wet.")

"I'm proud," said the little chunk of iron as he watched the metal space-ship. "My brother is in that same rocket."

Just to show you that my heart's in the right place, I'll let you use my X-ray machine. (Maybe I can do better with a story. The title is "Prey of the Space Egull.")

The ship thundered across the heavens, burping forth crimson flame. Wildly the wind shrieked to denote its passing. (Do you also offend? Use Sharp Soap.) It spun about, trailing streamers of fire leaping forth. (Don't let this happen to you. Smoke Crawleys; they're 50 per cent cooler.) Slowly the ship settled to the ground, issuing acrid fumes. (Let the fog-horn be your warning: "P-U") Metal scraped upon metal as Jupiter Egg staggered through the air-lock. (Drink Dyspepsia Cola. It's non-intoxicating.)

"They . . . got me, Egull," he mumbled as the Space Egull rushed to his side. "They got me this time."

"Who gotcha, Joe?" cried the Egull, his voice trembling with emotion. "Just tell me who, Joe, and you will be avenged. Who gotcha, Joe?"

"The . . ." muttered the fallen man, clawing at the Egull, vainly trying to rise. "The Draft-Board, Egull. They have put me into 1-A."

A comely wench all at once came upon the scene. She was dressed in a *synthestone* tunic and a platinum overcoat with U-235 buttons and a *metalloy* lining. She looked slightly droopy.

"A wounded man!" she exclaimed to the Egull. "Get the lead out and call a doctor!"

"Them's heavy words!" muttered Joe. "You just *weight*, and you'll be sunk."

"You're *plumb* crazy, you dirty *sinker*."

"I think she is a *copper*!" shouted the Egull, dropping her into the machine to get a *weight*.

("This is the last straw!") said the little kid as his friends crowded around his ice-cream soda.)

Sincerely,

G. WAIBLE,

"The Asinine One."

BLUEPRINT!

DEAR EDITOR:

New York 14, N. Y.

26 Horatio Street,

When one Vizifan pans a particular story, says it stinx—and the succeeding fan says that the same story lives and breathes—additional comment merely makes confusion more confused. But when there are "common denominators" in the Vizigraph letters, we may well seek the fire under the smoke. Frinstance, both DE PINA and ELOSEGUI turn thumbs down on the "blood-and-thunder" school(?) of writing. The use of the blood-and-thunder-plus-Superman technique presupposes a very low mental level of the readers. I resent that. Look at the way your readers go for, and vote for, stories that HAVE vastness, scope, and a type of social organism portrayed which gives us something to aim at. I seriously suggest that you bring the "blood-and-thunderers" UP to the 12-year mental-age level, if we must have 'em at all.

I am pleased to note that the concept I termed "vastness" in a story has been recognized as a desirable characteristic under such labels as "scope," "breadth," etc., by other Vizifans. PLANET needs vastness, scope, in its stories; that is what ranks P. S. above its rivals.

I am opposed to the criticism (?) of a story simply on the grounds that it uses techno-rhetorical configurations *per se*. ("ghastly green ovoids," etc.) and believe that the comment should concern itself with how *effectively* the particular device is used. IF their inclusion turns the story into a proseversion of Superman, then I, too, say thumbs down. But such writing CAN be effective; CUMMINGS uses it effectively in his "good" yarns, and sloppily in his (so-called) "hack" stuff. I believe that the primary concern in review-comments should be: IS IT EFFECTIVE as a means of creating a new "world" for us, during its reading. Doesn't *someone* agree with me?

I don't care if you are the Editor, I still think that PREY OF THE SPACE FALCON was the top-ranking story in the issue. Bond's PHANTOM OUT OF TIME and Brackett's THRILLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT tie for second place, in my own humble opinion. I am well aware that I may NOT rate stories according to the accepted standards of the rest of the fans; perhaps because I've got a "queer" set of standards which I use as my yardstick. I'd like to tell you about it:

It all boils down to why some people LIKE Science-Fiction, and others DO NOT. Of those who DO, some go for the "science," some for the "fantasy," and others read s-f because thereby they can get, vicariously, the "adventure" which we'd all like to instill into our lives, which do seem colorless at times, for us all. But ALL s-f fans have one thing in common; they possess a quality of *imaginative daring*. That's what makes them s-f fans. And this old world of ours NEEDS lots of that! We've messed it up quite a bit, this world of ours; at least the degree of social organization we've achieved leaves us little to boast about to the visiting Martians. We are being forced to a realization that the whole human family is ONE family. It's easy enough to prefer one "branch" of that family to all others, but sooner or later we'll be forced to rebuild that social organism into some semblance of "one-ness." We will need to PLAN a "world" in which the priceless principles of democracy are extended to ALL peoples, quite regardless of "outer" differences.

And that will take "imagination" . . . **IT WILL TAKE DARING.** It's too easy to fall back into narrow, provincial thought-patterns; we must avoid that. It will mean that a vast number of people must catch the "dream" of a world united; of a human family whose essential: characteristic is its *organic* unity. And where will we find that vast number of people who have the necessary quality of "imaginative daring"? I know of one possible source; the readers of Science Fiction! Haven't we watched humans like ourselves striving to bring order out of chaos in the most far-flung reaches of outer galaxies? Remember Leigh Brackett's **THRALLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT**? Remember how those pitiful remnants of the descendants of a human spaceship's crew finally solved their dilemma?

Didn't they discover that their "differences" were a seeming only, and that in "unity" there was more than strength; there was a renewal of purpose, and a rebirth of hope? Me, I lived through that episode, and before I'd finished the story, I was glad that I was human . . . glad that I belonged to a race which would some day put "force" aside in favor of common sense for the settlement of differences. The quality of "imaginative daring" has lifted man from the level of the beasts; it has shown him the advantage of social cooperation for the accomplishment of purposes which could not be achieved without it. And one day it will solve those differences which seem so nearly insurmountable now.

And how will this be done? Not by "soldering 16 bus-bars, to a super-octo-plethroscope" certainly. Not by the appearance of a Man of Wisdom from Alpha Centauri who will lead us to happier days. By men and women just like you and me . . . by people with *imagination* enough to see the solution of our problems, and with *daring* enough to forge through to the end of them. We who live in a democracy already *know* that, deep in our hearts, whether or not we've "thought it through!"

And so, I regard Science Fiction as the "blue print of a dream" . . . a dream that will one day come into being *because* people like us, people with *imaginative daring*, will take up the dream and make it into Reality. That's also why I'm a pushover for such stories as Brackett's **THRALLS OF THE ENDLESS NIGHT**, and for the work of such authors as DE PINA and PEACOCK, and all the rest of them who DARE to conceive of a world wherein humanity has emerged from the chrysalis-stage of dream, and has become *ONE* people, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice **FOR ALL**.

And that's why I like the **VIZIFANS** . . . because they are the sort of people who will one day help that dream to come true. Believe me, I think it is a privilege to be a science-fiction fan; it is a mark of distinction, and a proof of possession of that "Imaginative Daring" . . . see what I mean?

Now I've used up two and three-quarter pages, double spaced, so soon. No space left to "dissect stories, art-work, etc., individually. (Hear the contributors sighing with relief?) Thanks to CHAD OLIVER, MILT LESSER, JAY CHIDSEY, and LEONARD MARLOW for their bouquets. They warmed my heart, they did!

And thanks to you, Editor Peacock, for the stream of stories which make up our "blueprint for a dream." What if some "hack-writing" does slip in once in a while? You can't possibly please all of the fans, all of the time . . . or had you already guessed that?

Stories give us imaginary characters to think about, but the **VIZIGRAPH** gives us *real* people . . . and if I'm any judge of personal worth, they are "fine people." Several of them (no names, thus avoiding controversy) sound like level-headed folks who take their fandom seriously, but who aren't above a bit of humor, even caustic humor, when it is apropos. Me, I **LIKE**! Let's all buy a lot of bonds and get this war over with, so we can get **PLANET STORIES** back on a monthly basis. Four-per-year is entirely too few . . . and that in itself is reason enough to get right out and fight! And so, friend Editor, with a salute to yourself, and another for the Vizifans, I am

Sincerely,

ALAN MANNION.

OUR MALCONTENT!

Cloquet, Minnesota.
409 Twelfth St.

I am about to be transmuted into that special region of space-time frequencies that results in letters to the Editor and my frantic grab for the typewriter. Here goes, for the Fall issue. Sorry to hear you're back on quarterly basis, which I got from Unger's sheet a month before this came out.

By the way, I am expecting to get an "original" for this letter. I've never even seen one of the darn things; hope they look nice.

I will take the *things* in the order given in the contents. First, the cover. The artist really had a go at his erethism with it. I can only let out a long low resounding whistle and wish that they wouldn't clothe them with so much "Clothes." I suggest you keep the blue background. Your white one last issue didn't work out so hot.

Now the stories: I rate them in A B C, etc. system. I envy those guys who by some intricate series of mental peregrinations can say: "Hokus Q. Blank has written a fine story. Guess I'll give it nine point one zero eight." To my mind, the nearest you could get to rating stories and accurately at all is by something that may be made to cover a lot of ground. A is excellent, B is good, C is fair, D is poor, and F stinks. May I say that this issue's worst is D.

First comes Prey of the Space Falcon (Sorry, Wilbur, first in order, not in excellence) by that, Yours Truly, The Editor. It was space adventure, not very high class, but better done than usual.

Here I shall inject a pet subject of mine. How about more intellectual appeal in the stories? Adventure, as you have already learned from another letter of mine that I doubt will see print, is very tiring in more than medium doses. Isaac Asimov had it, and so has Eando Binder, but in the latter's stories it is woven in skillfully so you don't recognize it as such. You, Wilbur, had a very tiny dose, which should have been enlarged upon. By the way, your story got a not too well deserved C.

Bond's Phantom Out of Time. I wonder how many times I've read this theme? Nels has a sound narrative style, but his motivations and incidents are artificial and stiff. C—

Message From Mars is a plot that I haven't seen used for years and years, written nicely, stereotyped characterization. B—

Ah, now we get to something. It is brilliantly written, but at the end it gets a little

confusing. That seems to be its only fault. Leigh Brackett, it seems to me, is just developing, developing, to your prediction for her. A couple more years of plugging away, Miss Brackett . . . Strangely enough, it reminded me of two totally dissimilar stories. The first quarter gave me the impression of John Steinback's *Grapes of Wrath*, and the second half Robert Heinlein's *Universe and Common Sense*. If, I might as well tell you, was a far cry from either, about a third proportional to the two. Geometry students will no doubt understand. This, of course, had not much "intellectual appeal" and the plot was confusing. Please tell Miss Brackett to stick to stories without much plot, novels (futuristic, of course), like *Grapes of Wrath*. But her characterizations are quite good, and motivation excellent. I gave it A—

Mutiny in the Void was an amusing little tale, if you had enough morphine injected into you first. The trouble was with the uncertain characterization of the "farmer." C—

Both the other short stories read like something the authors thought of after a delirious dinner of blubber and whale oil and then sent to Peacock because "he's the guy what accepts the Cummings stories and pays money for them so these'll sell like hot cakes." Good God, what have I thought of. *There was no Cummings here*. D—both.

Now we come to that mightiest of departments wot gives out wit de opinions of youse readers. (Sorry, Wilbur, I'm going on; have to use of those three pages, you know) I really have to laugh at some of the letters, not because of the humor they try to put in it (most of it being achieved by the use of trick words and stuff) all because of trying to win a few originals to decorate their bare little dens. Who wants originals anyway? (Editor will now discredit that last statement as coming from an unbalanced mind, no doubt brought on by an excess reading of Looney Laddies, Termites, Zwillnicks, and not to forget those two geniuses, the Happy one and the Extraordinary one. Their attempts are so obviously pitiful, compared to my broad masterful covering of subjects concerning PLANET as I have done in this letter.

(I am here desperately stalling for time so as to think of something witty to say that will cinch me one of those originals.)

About the illustrations. Both Leidenfrosts can't draw. And if you have to have your artists give female characters not too much wardrobe, why not make them look seductive while they're at it. The Robimor for Bond's wasn't so bad, but on Brackett's tale. Aagh.

And then there's the guy from the same state as me who likes humor (and here's where the irony comes in) or irony in his stories. How can that be? Humor happens to be something entirely different from irony any way you look at it. Very few sf stories have irony—or humor either, for that matter. But it would be an improvement if somebody would write a story in an ironic tone for one. The story voted third place in a poll to find the great ones of all time was the most supremely ironical science fiction story I have ever read.

By the way, what issue do you choose your illustrations from (confident little cuss, ain't I)? Is it the one immediately before the one in which your letters are published? (Yes. Ed.)

Sincerely,
RAY KARDEN.

GIVE 'EM HELL, LEIGH!

DEAR EDITOR:

I have just procured the new issue of PLANET, and am still drooling over the cover. Rozen does beautiful work—even if, for some mystic reason, the picture seldom has anything to do with the text. Oh, well, who cares? His sense of form and color is right up there with the best, and for my money he does the best pulp covers on the stands.

As usual, I turned immediately to The Vizigraph and devoured avidly all comment concerning one, L. Brackett. And I am thereby impelled, if I may, to say a couple of things.

First of all, my heartfelt thanks to all you guys and gals who write in those nice comments. Whenever I hit a low spot in my work, I think of you and decide maybe I have a chance after all. There's nothing like a little praise to make a writer work his head off, and believe me, I appreciate it. However, in reply to Jay Chidsey's query as to whether I can take the sour with the sweet—maybe he doesn't read the Vizigraph as carefully as I do! Some of the lads and lassies really give out with the brass knuckles, and on numerous occasions Brackett has been left flat on the pavement, spitting out teeth and wondering which way the truck went. Well, it's all in the game, and I'd rather be panned than ignored. There's always hope that maybe the next yarn will look better to them.

And now for the chief reason for this letter. I am somewhat astonished at the reaction to CITADEL OF LOST SHIPS. The literary merit of the yarn is beside the point, and I'd hardly be competent to argue that, anyhow. But the undemocratic thinking of at least two of the critics causes me to gape. "We never feel sympathy for the Kraylens, whose pitifully few numbers and decadent state invite LIQUIDATION." . . . the decadent, anti-social, unsimilable castaways . . . should have been fumigated." F'cripe's sake! If that isn't totalitarian reasoning, I never saw it. Under democratic law, any and every minority, so long as it functions within legal limits, is guaranteed a right to live, think, and worship as it sees fit. You might as well say that we ought to LIQUIDATE the Mennonites, the Amish, or any other decent, peaceable group simply because they're different. Even that word LIQUIDATE is undemocratic. It implies the right of one man to decide whether other men are fit to encumber the earth, and is, I seem to remember, one of the reasons we're fighting a war. The castaways of Romany were not anti-social. They didn't hurt anybody. They just wanted to be let alone to die in peace, in their own fashion. And if they didn't like the way of life being imposed on them by aliens—didn't they have the *inalienable right of free men* to preserve their own way of life whether the aliens like it or not? The Kraylens, and Romany, are pure fiction. But the reaction to them shows a dangerous point of view. It's well to remember one thing, when you're planning the liquidation of minorities. Human society is a fluid and unstable thing. And it's frightfully embarrassing to wake up one morning and find that all of a sudden you have become—a minority.

(Our sentiments, exactly. Ed.)

Well, that's off my chest, and now I shall get back to work.

Sincerely,
LEIGH BRACKETT.

OH JOY! OH JOY! OH JOY!

DEAR EDITOR: San Bernardino, Calif.

Ah!—that May issue. It was excellent. More than that. Super-Excellent. I would even say Colossal, but the word has no meaning, expresses so little of what I mean.

Take that thrilling novel, **ALCATRAZ OF THE STARWAYS**. **MAGNIFICENT!** Albert DePina and Henry Hasse outdid themselves, they outdid everyone else for that matter, as if it mattered. How wonderful, how glorious, how insuperable was that moment when lo—the Warrior-Princess came! The story was the best I have ever read. It even was as good as the editor said.

And the Sandhound! Words fail me. When Ross Rocklynne spins a yarn, you can be sure that it's all bull and a yard wide. More than that. Perhaps even a yard and a half wide. He was called the Sand-Hound. How romantic. How intriguing! He walked on his hind legs and preyed on man. Marvoleon, if you will permit me to coin a word, and how can you help yourself. Marvoleon!

But as I approach the next masterpiece, I feel an urge to fling the typewriter away from me. If I have praised the preceding masterpieces, how can I find mere syllables to express the wonderment upon reading such a superduper. Keep Leigh Brackett. Here's an author with hair on his chest. Er—it was grand, grandiloquent, grandiloquent! I might even say it was good, but how inexpressive! How inexpressive!

But, again I am up a stump, so to speak. Here is a new author. A brilliant piece of work. The **METEOR MAKERS**. Can you believe it? After all these years, someone actually thought of making a meteor. The idea is so fresh, so devastating, so world-crushing, I can hardly repress—er, express myself. If one story alone could make history, then this story is it. Why don't you confine your magazine to such splendid narratives. Well told. Well written. Well enough. There is a place for Peter Hamilton. The world knows it. Peter Hamilton knows it. So does the Vizagraph. Well now—Mr. Hamilton.

If Hannes Bok is frightening in personating, then how much more imposing is his literary work. I approach this subject with care. Hannes Bok is not only a super tale-teller, a spinner of tall tales. He is also an author of some merit. A reader is at once entranced and enhanced. He hangs on every word, and just swings there gentle-like. Really, Hannes Bok is on a par with no one other than that literary hobnob with the bigdoers, that plutocrat of homosapi, that excellent and most honorary writer of great deeds, ladeez and gentlemen need I say more, Hannes Bok.

H. L. Gold. Even the name sparkles. The story sparkles also. It's the one story of the book that should have been gold-plated. If I could think of a tune to fit the words I'm sure it would hit Carnegie Hall. All is not gold that glitters. Indeed yes, but could you not say with equal veracity: All that glitters is not Gold, but if it is literary, then it glitters and is Gold. Heh, heh. Catch on. See what I mean, you readers from the back of 6B. All that glitters is not Gold, but in a literary sense, H. L. Gold. Catch on, kindergarteners. And you, honorable editor, do you on the catch.

Richard Storey. Why, oh, why wasn't his name spelled Storey. It should have been. It was. It spelled an unexcelled story. **MENACE**

OF THE MISTS. To think if I hadn't read this story I would have MIST it! Oh, well, such is life. Let me give you some excellent advice, Mr. Editor. Hang on to Mr. Storey. No matter how punk his manuscripts may read, you'll always know there's a Storey there. And what a Storey. The Mindless Horror from the Sea-Bottoms of Venus. Oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, oh boy, ad infinitum.

And Guy Gifford. Is he GREAT. Do I laugh myself, silly. Guy Gifford is really good. And I do mean good. Spell it G-O-O-D. But no matter how you spell it, Guy Gifford IS good.

Mr. Editor, let me congratulate you. I like everything about your magazine. Your cover—oh, great—(Pardon me while I scan Roget's Thesaurus)—I wonder how far Roget had to go back in time to capture a Thesaurus. There's an article idea in that, Mr. Editor, take a tip from me.

I like your artists. I like them all. They're the best. I like the arrangement of your illustrations. I dote on the **FEAURE Flash**. I tremble with joy upon reading the **Vizigraph**. Again I congratulate you. The edges on your magazines are just right. So are the staples and pages. I even like the **CONTENTS** page. The advertisements are just right to appeal to a fellow of my mentality. Thank you, oh thank you.

I congratulate you, Mr. Editor, on having such a wonderful lot of stories. I congratulate you on your writers. Best of the best. Your illustrators. Unbeatable! I congratulate you on your editor! I congratulate you on everything.

Again I congratulate you, for having been such an excellent arranger of super-stories and super-artists that you have done the impossible. **DONE THE IMPOSSIBLE!** I repeat it Almighty Ed, **DONE THE IMPOSSIBLE.**

Your **MAG WAS SO GOOD THAT IT RATED A FAN LETTER PRAISING EVERYTHING IN IT.**

EVERYTHING IN IT WAS WONDERFUL!

Did you ever get a letter like that before? Did any magazine ever rate a statement like that before?

And with bated breath I congratulate you on one final world-binding achievement. I can not bear to mention the subject except with bated breath and trembling fingers.

I CONGRATULATE you, Mr. Editor, ON HAVING SUCH A WONDERFUL READER,

Sincerely,
PRENTIS CARVER,
The Gory Goon.

MOVE OVER, WIZARD

Box 410, RFD—1,
Lowell, Mass.

DERE DEER DEAR MR. EDITOR PEACOCK!

I am taking my pen in hand to give you my opinion of the stories and pictures in your magazine, as my typewriter is still in a pawn-shop on Stamford St. in Boston and I will not be able to get it for some time.

I do not read very fast.

I see by the letters in the back of your book that it is very important to tell what stories and pictures are bad, so I will do so, also what is good in your Winter Issue 1940 Vol. 1 No. 5.

Your cover is good, but the artist does not draw girls good like the man who draws Flash Gordon, and not with so much clothes on. I do not like bugs and snakes on the cover.

"One Thousand Miles Below" was good but I do not like stories about people who live in

caves and eat bugs. The picture is good but it is to gray and not enough pretty girls without to much clothes in it. "The Castaway" was good but I do not like stories about castaways.

"Atom of Death" is good but I do not see why you print a story about air.

I did not read "Beyond Light" as I do not like stories about bats.

"Exit from Asteroid 60" was very good.

The other stories were very good but not as good as Flash Gordon, and no pretty girls.

As soon as my brother-in-law stops beating my sister I will borrow a stamp from her and throw this letter out in the street for our mailman to pick up. He is a R.F.D. mailman and he rides in an automobile.

I would subscribe to your magazine only he does not bring us mail any more, because our mailbox is on a highway in front of the house, and the highway people put their snow on our mailbox. He will not walk through the snow, and I do not like to shovel it, so I will wait for the spring thaw.

I have just dusted of my Spring, 1941 book and I will tell you about it soon. I found a morning paper under it, and it says I will have to register for a Selective service act which Congress has just passed. I will do it some day soon.

The people who write your letters in back must be very smart people too.

My sister is back again, she says there are two men downstairs who work for an F. B. I. Co. They are probably more fire insurance salesman, as we have a volunteer fire department, and we had a fire in our backyard. I told them about it on the telephone and then went out and put the fire out.

When they finished their dinner they came to put the fire out. I do not think they will come again as they were very mad because the fire was gone.

I will get rid of the insurance salesman and write right away about this other book.

Sincerely, I remain your very respectful friend and fan.

JOSEPH HENRY CONNELL

ALCATRAZ JUSTICE! OOPS!

The Chastleton,
Washington, D. C.

DEAR EDITOR:

After a lot of mental gymnastics I finally realized why my den is not covered with PLANET illustrations. After my initial success, I tried like merry hell to write a letter that *would* win a pic—instead of using the Vizigraph for its intended purpose. O.K., now I'm through with that; from now on I tell you what I like—and what stinks—and in three pages! Ready?

The Cover: Rozen is your best cover artist so far. He has good composition and his use of color is almost on the pleasant side; a fact which will probably make some fans tear their hair. Some of them seem to think that if the cover doesn't have a rainbow with St. Vitus dance on it—phooey! No good!

The Stories: Some of the blokes that have been yelling for good material in PLANET for so long, should be satisfied with this issue. "Alcatraz" is the best story you've published in PLANET. The characterization is excellent. The writing is smooth. The reading even better. I enjoyed the trick with Aladdo and Aladdin and the unusual method of dealing with the menacing space fleet. Let's have more like "Alcatraz!"

Just what Brackett's "Blue Behemoth" and Gold's "Grifters' Asteroid" are doing in PLANET I'm still trying to fathom. I'm very much afraid Brackett is leaning toward the hacky side—please don't encourage it.

Bok's story was all right, but here and there a few words gave the answer away too soon. And whoever writes the blurbs—didja have to use the word *inhuman*??? (Egad! Trapped like the rat we are!—Ed.)

To me, "Meteor Makers" needed some polish, but I enjoyed it because, combined with Paul's illustrations, I was once more wafted back to the "good old days."

"Sandhound" seems to come in with Brackett and Gold. What's buzzin', cousin? Are things and stuff changing for good old P. S.?

Which brings us to "Menace of the Mists." I enjoyed this one. The characterization was good. It was very well written—they sure killed a lot of them there bugs didn't they?

"The Ringer Family": Gifford's good—grand, gusty, guffaws greet Gifford's gags—grazy??

Incidentally, the new heading for the title page is good.

Feature Flash: Enjoyed the Flash on Rocklyme—but I still don't know very much about him. Flash him again, and get him to loosen up some more.

Illustrations: Don't know who did the one for "Alcatraz," but I don't think it quite did justice to the story. Bob and Harry work much like pop, don't they? Saaf is gonna have to work harder—better detail and more mass—otherwise, put him in a Sports' mag. Paul was the best in the issue. But what about Lubbers—didn't you get something crossed—didn't that belong in one of the Western mags? Doolin? Give him a few more chances—but he has a long way to go.

Suggestion Dept.: sorry (theoretically in fine print) but I only got one. How about boxing one more story an issue? Give us one off-trail yarn. Box it exactly as that—PLANET's Off-Trail Story. Shoot the works with it—this should give you an opportunity to pick up something new and good—some of those yarns you felt you had to pass up, because they didn't hit just right. Fantasy and sf readers are kind of tangled up anyway. Give us a fantasy-sf yarn—break from the title—use an Earth story. See what I mean? Well—it sounded good to me! (Sounds good to us. How about it, Vizifanners?—Ed.)

I haven't used all of my three pages yet, but I'll knock off anyway. Keep up the good work—and by that I mean superb stories like "Alcatraz."

Sincerely,

WILLIAM CONOVER—*The Nothing-as-yet.*

THIS GUY IS SORE!

18 West Huron Street,
Chicago, Illinois.

DEAR EDITOR:

I am a radio announcer, erstwhile engineer—(Don't like latter profession), read PLANET Stories for (frankly) "escape. . ."

I have been reading P. S. for some time—and enjoying it. I have also been reading the "Vizigraph" to see what the "Dear Readers" think, and I'm disgusted, no end!! I've noted that the majority of those letters PAN everything. Nobody likes nuttin'—or so it seems. If this is true, why don't said Vizifans read another mag? Who in hell is John Doe, Mechanic, to tell James Scratchalot, writer, how to write fantasy? Can

you tell me? Personally, I like your mag, and enjoy the major portion of its contents. And, I can understand that other individuals have individual tastes—very true—BUT!! Here's an Open Letter to "A Portion" Vizifan clientele:

"Read for enjoyable relaxation—respond broad-mindedly, and criticize constructively—or SHUT UP!! In other words, we're not ALL critics of the forty-second water, we're just readers."

And, Dear Ed, I know whereof I speak. I've been in my job a "little while"—have learned that in radio, as in publication writing, RESULTS are shown by SALES!! A radio fan either likes a show, and LISTENS—or he doesn't, and likewise, doesn't! So it seems, it would be with fantasy readers.

P. S.'s writers have my sympathy. It has been my lot to write more than 985 shows for radio production—perhaps mediocre, but salable. I know what it is to go sleepless, thinking up a new angle, a gag-line, a plausible climax—to decide whether to kill Mrs. Prittlepratt or not—and it gets d—tough at times!! A writer can have a fertile brain, and still have a tough time finding virgin ideas. A parallel—\$1,000,000 awaits any composer who can write *eight* bars of "original" music.—(Write U. S. Bureau of Business Credit Ratings for further info.)

Well, I've vented my spleen—made somebody mad and appeased my conscience by coming to the aid of the editor and P. S. Now,

If anyone wants to take exception to above thoughts, and desires a further discussion—I'm still buying P. S., and enjoying it—reading the Vizigraph—and wondering, "Could I paraphrase a bit—That which we call a rose, would, by any other name, smell as sweet?"—as I read a few of the rank rantings of a few self-appointed "second printing" editors.

Sincerely,

BOB R. GIBSON.

SCOURGE IN A GOOD MOOD!

Box 165,
St. Anthony, Ida.

DEAR EDITOR:

P. S. continues its strides toward the top with this issue (May). Something new has been added. I'm referring to that perfectly scrumptious heading for the contents page. It adds life and sparkle to it and sets it off swell.

I also see more new names on the contents page. At least new to me. I believe P. S. introduces more new material to the science fiction field than any other mag. And usually the new names give some keen competition to the old-timers. (You're right—Ed.)

Now let's dig into the reading matter this trip. This matter seems to be an excellent batch, too. That feminine phenomena, Leigh Brackett, walks off with the blue ribbon this time. No. 1 goes to "*The Blue Behemoth*." Let's have some more of those interplanetary circus stories handled by the very able Miss Brackett.

No. 2—"Alcatraz of the Starways." DePina and Hasse seem to be a good team. I didn't especially care for the ending though. With all the beautiful girls of Earth he had to pick a Venusian heroine. A dreadful shame, I call it.

No. 3—"The Sandhound." So there are even Robin Hoods in the far future. Rocklyne did a pretty good job on it, anyway.

No. 4—"Menace of the Mists." I liked this short, the first I've read of this author's work.

No. 5—"The Meteor Makers." Another new science fiction author for me.

No. 6—"Stranger from Space." Hannes Bok.
No. 7—"Grifters' Asteroid." H. L. Gold.

There wasn't one of these stories that I didn't like. Maybe I was in a good mood when I read them, maybe.

Artwork is keeping up with the stories in quality. Rozen gives us another good cover. First place goes to Paul for the Hamilton story on the inside. Second and third go to Harry and Bob Leydenfrost, respectively. I'll bet they will go far in illustrating, if they stick to science fiction. (Br-r-r-r-uph—clear my throat). Fourth to that guy Saaf. The first good one I've seen by him. Fifth to the unknown artist on pages 2 and 3. Sixth to Doolin and last to Lubbers, the only one I didn't like. Four bells to the "*Ringer Family*." That guy, Guy Gifford, is good. He actually made me laugh.

Aha ah-hal Now we come to the dear old Vizigraph which, if possible, is better than usual. The Scourge will now go into his routine concerning all fans. Chad Oliver—If the cover is done very good, what difference does it make what the theme is. The same to Larry Shaw. I like to see the triangle of hero-heroine-monster because I am anxious to see what new kind of monsters can be thought of. Nanek—Is that your real name or an alias? Probably an alias. You wrote a swell letter—from the second paragraph on. Careful how you talk about us readers. Some one may decide to get revenge and send the fork-eyed varma-snake of Neptune after you. Everyone spoke well of Cummings this time except Hunter (whatta crumb) and Carter.

WHEN DO WE GET TRIMMED EDGES?
HUH! WHEN DO WE?

Sincerely,

CLINTON BLACKBURN—*Scourge of the Vizigraph*.

QUARTERLY IT IS, SIR!

156 S. University Street,
Blackfoot, Idaho

DEAR EDITOR:

The May issue of PLANET is quite the worst in some time, I fear. It betrayed an almost total lack of the many features that once had PLANET near the top of the list in science-fiction, and punctuates Lesser's remarks with a most unpleasantly real affirmation. May I suggest, as I have twice before, that PLANET go back to quarterly format?

It was the quarterly that brought us Binder's "*Vassals of the Master World*" with all its sweep and strength; Van Houten's "*The Last Martian*," that echo of yesteryear; Rocklyne's great Hallmyer tales; Moskowit's "*Man of the Stars*"; Brown's "*Star-Mouse*," and so many, many others. And what has the bi-monthly given us, after three issues of publication? Rocklyne's "*Slaves of the Ninth Moon*." That's all! And that story shouldn't really be counted, being part of a series. . . .

Well, gang? What do you think?

Now take this issue, for instance (go ahead. you can have it, except for one or two things which I will comment upon as we come to them). Starting with the cover. Here we have a typical PLANET cover-scene—guy and gal fighting off Things—played straight, with no redeeming qualities whatsoever. None of the coloration of Anderson; none of Leydenfrost's ability and imagination; no Paul gadgetry, Bok grotesquerie, or Finlay beauty. Nothing! Nothing but the old, familiar guy and gal battling unbelievably-colored bug-eyed monsters beneath an unpleasantly contrasty masthead.

Look at the artwork. There's Paul, and Harry Leydenfrost, and—that's all. Paul is his usual self; one of the few things about this issue that is worth saving. He at least has imagination and some experience behind him. Young Leydenfrost is good—just that. His "*Sand-Hound*" pic at least manages to get into Rocklyne's mood—with its overall "sandy" effect—which is more than the others do. But the jerk who illustrated "*Alcatraz of the Starways*"—well, undergraduate—is as concise a term as I can think of right now. Bob Leydenfrost could probably equal, maybe outdo, his brother—but not with the drawing he turned in this time, a very poor and unrealistic job. Saaf's pic looks like a tangle of foliage—just that. The Lubbers' pic must have strayed in from a comic mag—that same meller-drammer, two-dimensional style. Ditto Doolin, who is in some ways worse than Lubbers.

Now, having polished off the art—wait. There's Gifford's cartoon. The gag as usual is corny, but the picture displays such a pleasing whimsy and fanciful buffoonery that it, too, becomes one of the items worth saving. I rated it above Paul.

As I was saying—the stories.

I never hope to see Miss Brackett do such a poor job again as she did this time with "*The Blue Behemoth*." It's the first of her stories that's really dragged. Then, too, she usually saves hackneyed plots with good development and strong character-drawing. Both were missing here, leaving only the hack elements. Gow might have been a good character but was lost in the whirl of action. The monsters might have been built up if they hadn't been so busy tearing down the village. In short, if about 30 per cent of the wordage had been cut out and a lot of characterization and description substituted for some of the fast action, the yarn might have been a bell-ringer. As it stands, however—a dud, pure and simple.

Also a dud was "*The Meteor Makers*." Despite the fact that the story raced like a chap with wasps in his pants, it failed to excite—because it was so fast that it left the poor reader far, far behind. The characterization was worse than "*Blue Behemoth*"—the people were mere hat-racks on which to hang the adventures. The astronomy was absurd—"Light Year" and "Parsec" refer to DISTANCE, not to time. The casec-disintegrator should have been planted earlier in the story; where it is, it gives the effect of the old hat trick—nick-of-time rescue hack. The suspense was infinitesimal—I didn't give a hoot which side won.

Next to be torn apart is "Menace of the Mists." This isn't so bad—it gets a rating of "fair." It at least held my attention all the way through; the idea, while, old, is sensibly developed; and the characterization is nebulous but at least exists.

Likewise rated "fair" is the lead story, "*Alcatraz of the Starways*." The setting of this one—the swamp—was, in fact, rather good; but there was nothing to the rest of the yarn at all. If an author has a man from Earth fall in love with a nonhuman a being as Aladdian, he ought to explain some of the why and wherefore—that part of the story fell flat. Also, the ending, which could have been so powerful, was ruined by brevity and vagueness of treatment.

Bok's "*Stranger From Space*" was his first story to rate less than "good," and was a distinct disappointment. Where are this author's usual beautifully eerie descriptions, his fantastic settings? The idea alone is not good enough to

save the story, so this, too, gets a rating of "fair."

But "*The Sandhound*" was good. The characterization was a polished, professional job; the setting was good, and well put across. The idea of the importance of pure sand to a Martian glassmaking concern is nice, and the plot-structure is put together quite deftly. But all must confess that Rocklyne has done much better.

And finally, "*Gritters' Asteroid*" is good. Not exceptional, but a clever piece of work. These pleasantly conscienceless chaps somehow possess a curious appeal; the devious swindles back and forth were really funny. "*Gritters' Asteroid*" is, in fact, by far the best story in this issue. In other issues, it wouldn't be noticeable, but after such tripe as "*Blue Behemoth*" and "*The Meteor Makers*" it reads like something very worthwhile. A buttonhole bouquet for printing it.

Well, that ought to leave a good taste in Ye Editor's mouth, perhaps inspire him to lift the mag back up to the heights.

And having said, he holds his peace.

Sincerely,

PAUL CARTER,

The Merely Quasi-Human.

KNOW? HECK! WE SPIN LIKE A TOP!

1019 Kishwaukee Street,
Rockford, Illinois.

DEAR EDITOR:

After reading many letters printed in the *Vizi*, I sometimes wonder if the editor knows which way to turn, whose stories to print, or what artists to use. There is a certain group, I will not indulge in personalities, that enjoys filling two or three columns of paper in the *Vizi*. Beware Paper Hogs!

The five top stories:

1. Star of Panadur—Hasse and De Pina—Typical of Hasse.

2. Oridin's Formula—Winterbotham—Makes you think.

3. Cosmic Castaway—Jacobi—well worn plot, but he "dood" it.

4. The Flame Breathers—Cummings—Some of the best science-fiction is printed under his name.

5. Slaves of the Ninth Moon—Rocklyne—Scientifically unsound—Movement of the core would result in the planet breaking up—any one care to argue the matter? Three other stories also got by the editor—Maybe I should try to slip one by him.

Art work is not for me to criticize, but I say the best pic is Paul's on Page 71. I have an insignificant suggestion to make for the cover—Velvet space—one of Kight's spatial craft—and nothing more. Where is Guy Gifford's cartoon?

Now for the trivia—I'm not an agent of Van Houten's, but in "*The Last Martian*" he has material for a novel greater than Robinson Crusoe—IS HE DEAD? Although I'm only a small voice, I should like to see Conover rewarded with an original for his prodigious efforts in the *Vizi*. Future PLANET improvement: 175 pages—weekly—100 page novel—50 pages of short stories—25 pages of *Vizi* and Features.

Gee I hope this isn't over one column.

Sincerely,

ROBERT GLENN ANDERSON,
The Mental Ultimate.

QUESTION 13!

1151 South Broadway,
Los Angeles.

DEAR EDITOR:

So—PLANET goes quarterly again?

Boy that brings the war close to home, doesn't it? Made me so damn mad when I heard the news I went back to my draft board, sailed past the reception desk and shouted at the clerk: "When you gonna take in fathers? I want to get at this guy Hirohito."

He looked the great Gifford over and says: "What the H—? You had another fight with your wife."

I didn't bother to tell him what was the trouble. I turned and sadly walked away. I couldn't explain to him about science-fiction—he's too sane.

I'll get in this war yet—I've been reclassified so many times I feel like the want ad section of a newspaper. While we're on that subject, if you know any "fore-efs" who like to work for a railway have them contact me. The mental examination isn't as hard as the physical exam. For the physical, the doc puts a thermometer in the applicant's mouth, and if he's warm, he's hired.

But back to the paper shortage—I have an idea. An idea how we can make Science-Friction come regularly—bimonthly. Let's develop a new type of fiction writing. Let's title them "Telegraphic Tales."

This plan would simplify the publishing, solve the paper shortage and give us several more pages of letters in the Vizigraph (though it is getting a bit Hacky, ed., and if it doesn't pick up I'm going to have to start reading the stories just to get my money's worth).

Here is a sample of a telegraphic tale:

Title: Beauty and The Beast, or if you want to be different, "Beast and the Beauty."

"Boy bumps into blonde. Blonde busy beating about bush dodging hungry Whiffledorf. Boy and blonde battle beast. Beast feasts. Boy empties bicarbonate while being swallowed by strange beast. Beast belches."

Now there, dear Peacock, is a tale with science—the boy was carrying a ton of bicarbonate. With action. Picture, if you can, a Whiffledorf belching. See what I mean by action. The love interest is developed when the boy and blonde are going down the hatch. The moral, for those who have to have morals—is always carry your own baking soda unless you eat in a restaurant that puts it in the coffee.

Of course it has a very happy ending. I'm sure every one of our millions of readers will feel relieved when the beast belches.

Now to the Vizigraph.

There's too many geniuses floating around. There's the Happy Genius, or is it Slap Happy? Then there is Genius Extraordinary. Don't you think that's overdoing the Genius thing? My suggestion is for the letter writers to wait until other letter writers had given them nicknames. I'm sure those titles would be much more interesting. Jay Chidsey's letter was best in the Vizigraph until he added the Jap story which has been more or less overdone recently. Besides he spelled Gluckstein's name wrong. A very clever lad and I, too, like his work.

In answer to James Russel Gray, who should have first place, because of a swell lead into his letter, the reason no Gifford letters have come to Vizigraph for months is because I had one of those government questionnaires to fill out.

You know what that is, or are you one of those fortunate enemy aliens?

As you have heard, perhaps, question thirteen is "Have you ever been in an insane asylum?"

I answered it truthfully, "No."

But the other day when the thing was finally finished and my secretary mailed it she added a postscript in the place marked for "Remarks:" Note. Question to number thirteen is now "Yes."

Albert De Pina's note was very pleasant. His description of the desert was nicely done—what there was of it.

It's rather hard for a writer, professional, to swing into the free and easy "Don't give a damn" style of these letter hacks. Letter hacking is a business all its own. Some day it will be featured in the front of the mags.

And so I'll close for now, friend Peacock, with a little proposition. I'll trade you three red stamps, or one "A" ticket for the phone number of the blonde on the cover of the mag.

(Let's not get nose, Bub! Ed.)

Sincerely,

GUY GIFFORD.

ANOTHER NEWCOMER!

545 West 111th St.,
New York, N. Y.

DEAR EDITOR:

I've never written to a Science-fiction mag before, so I thought it's about time I announced myself. I am, like most other Scientifiction readers, a genius. (Not a happy one, like Milt Lesser.) But, unlike most Scientifiction geniuses, I don't boast about it. I don't have to boast about it. It shows all over my face. It shows in the way I talk and write, so, naturally, I don't brag about my being a genius. But enough of this irrelevant (I picked that word up for 2 bits from my cousin) twiddle-twaddle about myself. We come to the subject at hand. PLANET STORIES. We shall start with the covers. When, oh when, dear Wilbur Scott Peacock, do we get rid of the BEM'S (this time with antennae and tentacles at the same time, yet), the mightily-muscled hero (outnumbered as usual), and the beautiful heroine? (this time clinging to a rope, like a female Tarzan). Why not a cover with some spaceships blasting each other out of the skies, with the hero winning for a change? The May cover picture scared my poor pappy half to death.

Now, we come to a important part of any magazine. The stories. To rate them I will use a 0 to 10.23 basis, I figured out in one of my lighter moments. I will also take the illustrations for each story as we come to it.

Here's the way they rate:

(I don't think there was one outstanding story in the ish.)

1. "Alcatraz of the Starways" by De Pina and Hasse.—9.02 is what it rates. An old plot, written up newly and well. Can always depend on Hasse. But the illustration!

The artist must have been scared to sign his name. What a piece of trash!

Alladian looks like she's gonna fly away instead of save Mark.

2. "The Blue Behemoth"—8.00. I am disappointed in Miss Brackett. For an author like her to turn out trash like that. (Even though it was 2nd best.) I was disgusted with the whole issue. (Though only slightly.) It is way below

her usual level. After the improvement of your magazine in the issue before this, you sure took an awful flop. I'll be waiting for the next issue to see if you can soar back to the wonderful heights of last issue. Here's hoping! As for the pic. of the "Blue Behemoth:" Maybe it's the subject Bob had to work with, but Poppa Leydenfrost had better give Bob a few more lessons.

3. "The Meteor Makers"—7.99. I liked this story immensely. I, myself, don't know how it got down to 3rd place. It lacked a certain something. However, I was pleasantly amazed that Sullivan didn't turn out to be an agent of the Space Guard. The pic's by Paul, so it naturally was good.

4. "Grifters Asteroid"—7.66. Fine Humor but it ended off rather weak. The illustration was a little below average.

5. "Menace of the Mists"—7.5. Average. Or just a little better than average.

Doolin's illustration was fine. In fact, excellent.

6. "Stranger from Space"—7.4. Old, old plot. But Bok gave it a new twist. The illustration was good.

7. "The Sandhound"—6.00. After the Masterpieces Rocklyne usually turns out, this one was back. Looks like he turned it out in 15 minutes. Pure Adventure. It would have made a good Western. Give Ross Rocklyne another chance to redeem himself in the next ish, which I'm sure he will do. Now the illustration comes. Magnificent, perfect. The Real Leydenfrost touch. Harry is really carrying on for the family. The best pic in the magazine.

Now for a separate résumé of the pictures. The best, as I've mentioned already was Harry Leydenfrost's for "Sandhound." Second was Doolin's for "Menace of the Mist." Plenty of action. Third was Paul's for "Meteor Makers." I don't have to go over his qualities. Special mention for Saaf in "Stranger from Space," and B. Leydenfrost, even though the pic wasn't so good. He looks like he could go to town.

Now don't get the idea I didn't like this issue, even though I've been "Riding it down." I just expected more. I'm pretty sure you'll bounce up to all my expectations. We can't be perfect all the time. Oh, well, look at me. I almost forgot the Vizigraph! Unpardonable! My genius made me remember in time. The Vizigraph was wonderful as ever. Better than last time. It gets better with each issue. Top honors are going to Allen Mannion, direct from one genius (we) to him (another genius). Second to Chad Oliver, the Ledgewood Lark. And Third to Jane Garvignon. I'm running out of Rocket Fuel now so . . .

Sincerely,

DAVID BELLIN,
(Manager, Rocketeer's Hotel on Planetoid 62.)

GERGEN'S PRETENDING!

636 W. 3rd Street,
Hastings, Minn.

DEAR EDITOR:

Something which I have longed to see on PLANET STORIES since its inception is a really good cover painting. Why can't your cover illustrators portray scenes other than the customary hero - and - scantily - clad - heroine - attacked -

by - alien - monstrosities? There are probably any number of passages in the stories which could be capably portrayed instead of the now timeworn free-for-all pictures.

The stories in the last issue were all good, as were the accompanying illustrations, with the exception of the one for Brackett's tale.

My particular choice for best in the issue is Carl Jacobi's "Cosmic Castaway." While not a classic of science-fiction, this piece of writing intrigued me because of its style, reminiscent of some of the science-fiction we used to see years back. The Paul pic for this story was good.

Ross Rocklyne is another writer who never fails to please my tastes. His "Slaves of the Ninth Moon" was second only to Jacobi's opus, and held my interest all the way.

John L. Gergen's letter in the readers' section is most interesting. If the chap dislikes the magazine so, why in the name of Ghu doesn't he stop reading it? Frankly, I believe he only likes to see his gripings in print, and doesn't really hate PS as he pretends to!

I've been reading PS ever since the first issue, and find that I get more all-around enjoyment from it than I do from any other s-f publication now being sold. I like your editorial policies, the stories you publish, and the format.

Sincerely,

JOHN M. OLSON.

HAIL THE DWELLER!

1132 South 3rd St.—Apt. No. 2,
Louisville, Kentucky.

DEAR EDITOR:

I have pulled a low-down, dirty trick on Science-Fiction! I am a jerk of the lowest order! Verily, sir, I am a cur! But don't take my word for it; I'll qualify my every statement.

You see, for more than ten years now, I've read every piece of Science- and Fantasy-Fiction that came within shooting distance of a Zatch-ray. And never—not once, mind you—have I taken the time to write to any magazine, expressing my sincere appreciation for so many pleasurable hours of "escape." I have cussed the Authors, the Editors and the Artists; I have turned right around and praised them all to the high Heavens; but all to myself. I am the original "Dweller in Darkness." Now, that's a dirty trick to pull on anybody; therefore, I shall crawl out of my hole in space, and give vent to—give vent to—well, whatever it is that one gives vent to under such circumstances.

Hail the Dweller!

Now—let's get down to the business at hand. First off, let's get one thing settled once and for all time to come; namely, the question of what to do with Ray Cummings. Personally, I'm neutral in the battle of gripes concerning his works. I haven't read one of his stories since the "Atom" series degenerated into whatever it is he's turning out now, but I've got something here that I'm definitely in favor of: Let's either lock the editorial door on him and shut up about his inabilities as an author, or—let's keep on printing his stuff for those who do seem to like it, and *still* shut up about the aforementioned inabilities! In order to please a greater number of readers, I should say off-hand that the latter suggestion takes care of the problem. By all the Pigs of Circe, if the boys "over there" were fighting the

Axis as hard as the Vizifans are fighting Cummings, the war would have been won long, long ago. But whichever course we take, in the name of all the Gods, let's shut up about the Works of Cummings! I'm sick of reading all these gripes! Surely there's something floating around in the Cosmos somewhere that we could get up a good, meaty feud over besides one man! *Now shut up!*

Well, I feel much better now. That's been bearing down on my alleged chest for quite a spell, and I'm darned glad to get it off.

I suppose I might as well rate the stories in the March issue now as any time. So, here goes, using the most accurate rating—that of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest rating any story can achieve:

"Slaves of the Ninth Moon"—9.5; Rocklynn is still right up there as far as I am concerned. I liked his delicate treatment of the last seven paragraphs. The struggle for domination between the two minds, and finally, the Old Man's thoughts on Space were very nicely handled. A darned good yarn!

"Citadel of Lost Ships"—9.4; This Brackett has a style that does something to me. Could be she cooked up a new idea there, too. Can't think where I've read of such a conception before—maybe I haven't. Give her credit, anyway.

"Star of Panadur"—9.4; Can't imagine why one of the shorts came in neck and neck with a novelette. Must be the way a simple plot was built up with a nice flow of the King's English. I just wonder where dePina stopped and Hasse began on this one? Hmmmmmm?

"Cosmic Castaway"—9.3; Lord! What a title! Sure, it fits the story, but—! Sounds like "The Plight of Penelope!" Give it fourth place. Jacobi has a nice style of putting words together, but I can't go for this one too much. I read it first, too, so I wasn't worn out when I got around to it. Maybe it's the coffee rationing.

"Sword of Johnny Damokles"—9.3; Something in this one that fascinates me somehow. Perhaps it's the deft handling of the Greek trying to speak American. Can't think of any other reason for liking it.

"Oridin's Formula"—9.0; So the most dreaded man in all space lays aside his gun, enters into a discussion with the man he came to murder, and winds up figuring himself into a blue funk, eh? Tch, Tch!

"Trouble on Tycho"—8.5; Maybe somebody will explain how a combination of sounds could penetrate the stone armor of those Grannies and kill 'em without killin' the Wonder Boy, too.

"The Flame Breathers"— —; (See paragraph four.)

I agree wholeheartedly with brother Verity, when he says that you are giving us the oldest type of true Science-Fiction—the interplanetary yarn. But even at that, I can feel a longing for something that the "Old Boys" had; some intangible something that just isn't in the new stories. Maybe it's because SF was a new field then, and it was a new adventure every time I read a story. For at that time, plots were things that people didn't rewrite over and over again; they didn't have to. Stories like "Invaders from the Infinite," and "The Legion of Time." There was a yarn that expounded an entirely new conception of Time travel and the relation of prob-

ability to possibility. By the way, that theme hasn't been touched upon, either. All sorts of possibilities in there for an enterprising author. The question I'm asking is, What's happened to the Science in Science-Fiction? Can it be that we are getting so accustomed to reading of things that, ten years ago, would have been new to us, that we take them for granted? That happens with everything else, you know: Radio, movies, television. We simply accept them as facts, and let them go at that. Have the authors run completely out of material, or have the readers reached the stage where nothing is new any more? 'Tis indeed a sad state of affairs. Now—I have a twenty-thousand word concoction that—ooooo!

And another thing—! For golly sakes, put those two staples back in the paper! I had pages from PLANET STORIES all over three rooms before I got through the first story this issue. I know there's a shortage of metal, but this can't go on! You might try tying it up in pink ribbons like a scrap book; at least, the book would stay together until a body could finish reading it!

What's all this about you using a pen name on your stuff? What's that for? Don't you trust your dear readers any further than that? Certainly we don't want you to use a pen name! If you've got something that's worth printing, it is certainly worthy of your own good name, isn't it? Now, go stand in the corner! By the way, "Planet of No Return" was very well written. So there!

Let's take a bite at the art work, shall we?

First, the cover: Whoooooee! Where did you get this boy, name of Rozen? This cat's hep to the jive! He really comes on! The man can paint like all get out! Shading, detail, coloring—first choice for prize! It is quite evident that something has happened to Paul lately. Maybe he just doesn't do as well with line drawings as he does with a brush, but I don't go for his interiors much. They just don't look like Paul to me. How about a credit line for the pic on pages 44-45? I don't recognize the vague outlines and shadowy depths in this one! Doolin has got too much light scattered around on page 25. After all, the stars and planets are in plain sight, yet the foreground looks like it might be high noon. He did a pretty good job on page 39, though. Personally, I like that Frank Godwin pic on page 38—the USO thing! There I go again! Lubbers couldn't have spent much time on that abortion on page 65! Shall we forget it? Walker has a rather confusing conglomeration on page 91, too, doesn't he? There's that man again on page 101. Why don't you give him credit? Isn't it the same guy who did the one on 44-45? Or am I going blind—again? That's a nice bit of drawing on the Vizigraph, too. Think I'll make that my second choice. I keep hearing funny, rasping noises in my ears. Someone must be reading this!

All of which brings me to the fifty-third clause in the contract, which says, quote, "Go to bed!" Unquote. Mayhap I shall do better after I get into the swing of this Vizigraph writing. Anyway, I'll be back next time, and if I so much as hear a whisper about Cummings from a Vizifanner between now and then, I shall personally rend him appendage from appendage! And don't forget those staples!

Sincerely,

FRANCIS ELLIOTT,
The Dweller in Darkness.

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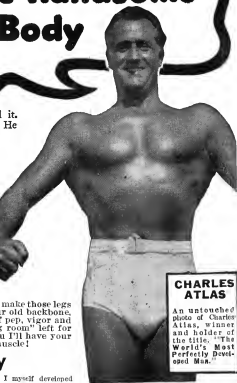
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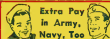
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